

SPECIAL ISSUE ON WOMEN AND SUPERSTITION

- Women's Conference and Declaration
- Conference for the Manifesto of Superstition Eradication for Women
- Women's Declaration on Eradication of Superstition
- Predominantly Prevailing Superstitions
- Secondary Status Imposed by Religion on Women
- Effect of Superstition on Health and Nutrition
- Comprehensive Social Change
- Plan of Action
- Lighthouses in the Dark Seas

Women for Peace and Development

Women everywhere face the problems arising from long established inequality between sexes, and from the threat of local and global war. The inequalities cannot be tackled except through a reconditioning of the thinking of society and of both men and women. Very often women are themselves opposed moving forward because of their traditional conditioning in favour of maintaining their various disabilities. There is a symbiotic link between national educational policies both for men and women and the continuation of such disabilities. To change the social environments that sanction such disabilities, it is necessary to undertake governmental and community action on many fronts, more particularly in respect of educational policies and of economical growth, and to ensure the social mobility and liberation that come from personal, economic and social freedom.

C B Muthamma

Women's Conference and Declaration

Women's Wing of the Andhashraddha Nirmoolan Samitee (ANS) Latur, had organised a conference on the 27th - 28th November 2004 to bring out '*Women's Declaration on Eradication of Superstition*'. The groundwork of this conference was done at many district level meetings, workshops, discussions training courses, etc. A number of issues concerning women and superstition were discussed threadbare at these sessions. The opinions and views expressed in all these gatherings are consolidated and circulated to all branches of ANS. The following is the gist of these discussions.

Need for Declaration

Women are the worst victims of superstition in India and at the same time they are the most effective propagators of superstitions. The male dominated culture of our society has enslaved women for so long that they have lost all sense of self-esteem and self respect and feel completely helpless in the struggle for survival. Having lost all hope of any achievement or success in life, they develop a negative outlook of themselves. No wonder, that superstition is so deep-rooted in the minds of women in India. To deal with superstition, therefore, we will have to concentrate on women. The society as a whole and women

themselves have to be made aware of this fact and of the need to prepare a plan of action to free women and the society from this mental apathy and slavery.

ANS' Initiative

The ANS has decided to initiate the movement of 'Freeing Women from Superstition' with great earnest and urgency. A number of dignitaries: social activists, actors and actresses with a zeal for social upliftment, writers, poets and eminent persons in various other fields have blessed this movement and had graced this gathering with their presence. They have expressed their views on topics such as the various superstitions in women, their causes, the kind of change that is needed, ways of changing women's negative attitude towards themselves and an action plan to bring about these changes.

Enlisting Support

In addition an attempt had to be made to enlist as much support from as many walks of life as possible. ANS activists and others to create awareness of this problem wrote several articles on each of these topics. These articles were published in various newspapers and magazines. They also brought into light the urgency of this movement and the utter need of participation in this movement by every right-minded Indian, whatever his/her religion, caste or creed may be.

Conference for the Manifesto of Superstition Eradication for Women

In our country, women are the main victims of superstitions and yet they are also carriers of superstitions. In order to focus the society's attention on this fact and to make available a thought and action plan to end the mental enslavement, the ANS published a manifesto in a conference organized at Latur on 27th & 28th of November 2004.

156 years back Marx and Engels published a manifesto concerned about the exploitation of the workers. By about the same time Mahatma Phule started a school for education of women. Now ANS on its way to achieve the intended reforms, published this manifesto, which definitely is a step forward in the field of superstition eradication. The Latur branch, which was awarded as the most active branch in the state last year, has completed 10 years. The Latur district, which has the maximum number of ANS branches (24), took initiative to organise this mammoth conference. More than 1000 representatives of ANS, Vivek Vahini and other women organizations, from all over Maharashtra attended the conference with all vigor, cheer and vivacity. While the stage itself was named after Savitribai Phule, the hall was named after the Muslim associate of Savitribai, 'Fatimabi Sheikh'. The conference was inaugurated by Rajanitai Patil, the chairperson of Mahila Arthik Vikas Mandal, in the presence of Kishanrao Deshmukh, Laxmanrao Dhoble erstwhile minister and several other dignitaries, and was presided over by the senior critic and progressive thinker Pushpatai Bhawe.

Purpose of the Manifesto

Superstitions are deep-rooted in the lives of most of the women. People seek the support of superstitions to avoid or escape difficulties, calamities, frustrations & failures. The womenfolk are more vulnerable to such realities of life, hence are more superstitious. The most important reason is the chauvinist or male-dominated system of the society. Everything in a woman's life is viewed with reference to the man in her life - the father, the husband and the son! The treatment she gets and status she enjoys is in accordance with these relations. All the religions in the world have given secondary status to women. Such is the strong & deceitful

influence of religion that they consider inequality itself as a life-support, & hold on to out-dated customs, traditions & rituals. Lack of education, lack of means of earning or unequal wages, sexual abuse, renouncement of right in property, projection of femininity as commodity in commercials - all these factors contribute to her vulnerability & hence to superstitions.

Direction of Expected Changes

Among the discussions and meetings held in different districts of Maharashtra prior to the conference & during the group discussions in the conference, certain important points came forward that are included in the manifesto:

- Promotion of literacy in women and at the same time teaching them to think independently should be the priority. Propagation of scientific temperament even in illiterate women is equally essential. Development of a capacity among women to understand the cause-effect relationship in every phenomenon is also important, so that they would be able to analyze the customs, rituals & traditions & practice accordingly.
- Women should not consider themselves inferior & should develop their own intellectual abilities & talents to endorse equality. They should give equal & gender-free treatment to their children so that the boys would not have superiority complex & the girls an inferiority complex.
- Women are considered unholy (*impious/profane?*) by the religion & therefore are banned to take part in religious functions. This should be defied against & be stopped. They should have their own independent status in the society & should not be considered in reference to the man in their lives.
- Women should give equal importance to their own health as to their children & husband's. They should take care of their own & the family's health by means of nutritious diet, hygiene, proper immunization, medical treatment & rest. They should have the right to decide the number of children they want to have depending upon their physical, mental & economic capabilities & should not yield to others' wishes.
- Women should not surrender to the miseries in life & should increase their capacities to face these so that no pseudo supports would be required. The misuse of the very image of woman & spreading superstitions through the media like newspapers, television & films should be protested. Development of scientific temperament & emphasis on rational morals in children would make the future society free from exploitation & fear.

Action Program

An appeal is made in the manifesto to the various women organizations & all social reform movements expecting special emphasis on the following, along with their other activities -

1. Clear and direct opposition to superstitions like *buvabaji*, poltergeist, witchcraft, omens, miracles, and possession by a deity or ghost.
2. Marriages should be simple & without dowry, denying the priests & *muhurt*. *Satyashodhaki* method or registration should be considered.
3. Women should get equal wages for the same work & should have rights in the property.
4. A new family law should be created which goes beyond religion & is based on equality.
5. An attempt should be made in all possible ways to promote education of girls & to continue it uninterrupted, without any dropouts.
6. Customs like *sati*, *devdasi*, child marriage that are shame on humanity should be strongly resisted.

7. A strong public opinion should be created against sex-determination of foetus followed by abortion (if girl) & commercial use of the image of woman by the media.

As for the ANS, an action plan has already been planned for the New Year so that all the branches in all the districts in the state of Maharashtra will soon be acting on it. This includes seeking support from renowned personalities in different fields; arranging lectures, gatherings and workshops to convey the message of the manifesto; strengthening the movement to eradicate the special *Bhanamati* observed in *Marathvada* province & the witch-hunting in Nandurbar district; all this starting with an activity-filled first week of the new year.

Some prominent personalities attended and guided the participants attending the conference. While renowned psychiatrist Dr. Pradeep Patkar spoke about "Rational Parenting", Prof. Lata Jadhav, Suniti S.R. & Dr. Yashwant Sumant discussed the religious bias about women. In the concluding session of publication of the manifesto, social leader and the president of ANS Dr. N.D. Patil, actor-philosopher Dr. Shriram Lagu, ANS chieftain Dr. Narendra Dabholkar and leader of the "Narmada Bachao" movement Medhatai Patkar expressed their views.

Dr. Ashutosh Mulye

Women's Declaration on Eradication of Superstition

Purpose of Declaration

There is no denying the fact that women are the worst victims of superstition in our country. At the same time they are the main agents who propagate superstitions most. The whole society should acknowledge and understand this fact, so that, ways can be found to eliminate this mental slavery of women. ANS is bringing out and circulating this draft declaration to facilitate developing a constructive programme of eradication of superstition.

Points to Ponder

The superstitions harboured by women are much too deep-rooted. The reasons are many. They have to face many more difficulties and obstructions, defeats, despair and calamities than the men. Consequently the helplessness that arises out of these is much more pronounced in women than in men. No wonder they become more superstitious.

The second reason is our male dominated society. A good husband and a son is the sole achievement that a woman can aspire to in life. Almost all the religions in the world relegate woman to a secondary status, denying all knowledge and learning to her for thousands of years. These religious teachings are so deep rooted that women have now come to believe that all this is but natural and they tend to find support and help in this very disparity and discrimination engendered by religion between the genders. She embraces all outmoded traditions, customs, and rituals with practically no change even to this day. Lack of education lack of jobs or any means of earning, becoming victim to sexual atrocities, less remuneration for the same amount and kind of work, denial of property rights and being looked at as objects of pleasure in the adds, push her into superstition and accepting her lot without protest.

Guidelines to bring about necessary changes

1. Educate women. Not only should women be taught the three 'R's but they should be educated to think on their own.
2. The habit of understanding the cause-effect relation behind all happenings should be inculcated in her so that she would be able to examine every custom, tradition and ritual and decide on her own what she wants to accept or reject and carry out her decision without fear.
3. In order to remove all gender disparities it is essential that women stop considering themselves lesser beings and instead make all efforts to develop their intelligence and other potentials.
4. There should not be any discrimination in the treatment of boys and girls in the home. This will avoid development of egoism in the boys and inferiority in the girls.
5. Women are considered polluted and not allowed to participate in certain religious ceremonies. Such practices should be condemned and stopped forthwith.
6. Women should have their own independent identities and not considered as somebody's wife or daughter or some such relation.
7. Women ought to pay as much attention to their own health as they pay to the health of their husbands, children and other members of their family. Proper nutrition, cleanliness, timely inoculation and vaccination, necessary medicines and enough rest are important for the whole family including the women.
8. Women alone should have the right to decide how many children they should have considering their physical and mental health as well as financial ability to support the offspring. She should be able to resist all external pressures.
9. Instead of succumbing to calamities women should face them squarely and not resort to any false hopes offered by Buvabaji and god men.
10. All of us should condemn the spread of superstition and abuse of women's image that is carried on by the media- newspapers, television, films, etc. One must remember that it is not impossible to do this even individually.
11. It is important that scientific outlook is inculcated in the children to develop their rationality and constructive attitudes, which will help them form a fearless and courageous society devoid of any exploitation.

Predominantly Prevailing Superstitions

Women in India and perhaps all over the world are prone to be superstitious be they Hindus, Muslims or believers of any other religion. The Andhashraddha Nirmoolan Samiti (ANS) has been working to eradicate this malice for the last several years. They have investigated into all sorts of superstitions prevailing predominantly in the rural areas of Maharashtra and have categorized them as follows, for the sake of convenience in understanding and tackling them.

The main categories distinguished by ANS are:

- Bhoot (being possessed by a ghost),
- Bhanamati (Conjuring is one kind of Bhanamati and another is a sort of temporary mental breakdown causing odd behavior)
- The custom of Dakin (sort of witch hunting)
- Buvabaji (pretending to possess supernatural powers and cheating gullible needy people). The basic ingredient of all these categories is '*being possessed*' either by a ghost or a spirit good or evil. They are discussed here one by one.

Bhoot-Being possessed: This is a state of mind similar to hypnotism. The mind of the affected woman (or man in rare cases) is temporarily disintegrated because of mental tension caused by unbearable disturbances in her personal, family or social life. When possessed the woman finds some solace and feels temporary relief. But this relief is deceptive. At times the concerned woman is supposed to be possessed by a deity and thereby attains dignity and reverence in the society. When in stance on such occasions the woman is supposed to acquire supernatural powers of seeing the future or finding solutions to difficult individual and family problems. These happenings take place on certain days like the eighth day of the month according to the Hindu calendar or the full moon or new moon day or on the day of the village fair. Being possessed helps a person to enhance her importance and even earnings. So at times this can be sheer pretence for obvious reasons. But when it is not, the affected woman suffers from mental and physical exhaustion and whether a pretence or otherwise, the gullible, ignorant villagers are the losers. The malady ought to be treated and to do that, it is necessary to understand the causes that are rooted in the slave like treatment given to women and then find comprehensive solutions.

Bhanamati: This malady is of two types. In the first type, clothes get torn, or set on fire or houses get stoned or small bits of stones spill out of eyes and ears of the victim or cross marks (made by marking nuts) emerge on the body, all of a sudden, miraculously and on their own. Such occurrences become news and are widely discussed by the village folks. In fact some person does this out of desperation but intentionally. Obviously women hugely outnumber men in performing these desperate acts. The ANS have developed an effective technique of investigating into the Bhanamati occurrences. They take care not to disclose the identity of the woman involved in it and offer her psychological support and treatment, so that she is no more in need of continuing this bizarre behaviour. In the other type of Bhanamati the affected person starts puffing, blowing, panting and gasping or barks like a dog. The person also rolls violently and noisily on the floor. While in such stance that person reveals the name of somebody that has supposedly caused some incident detrimental to the people of that locality. The person so named becomes a suspect and is just not able to continue to live there. Moreover when one woman is so possessed many others, as if infected by her, start puffing and panting. It creates a very weird and frightening atmosphere. The rural, unlettered population of Marathwada is especially prone to become victims of this malady. At times even the educated people seem to believe in it. The ANS has been struggling to eradicate this menace for the last two decades, creating awareness among the public and educating people regarding its causes, remedies and also who benefits from such activities. This movement coupled with the humane treatment given to the victims by the ANS workers has reduced the occurrence of this phenomenon considerably. ANS will continue its agitation till it is completely eradicated from the society, of course with the co-operation of all concerned.

The Custom of Dakin: In the tribal areas, even today, people believe that all mishaps are caused by some woman casting evil spells. The Badawa or the Bhagat (a supposedly spiritual man able to detect the culprit by his mystical powers) of the place, on being approached by the people, indicates some woman as the culprit. The hapless woman then is branded a Dakin and persecuted and made to leave the village. At times she is even killed and the killer is proud of his deed- 'killing a Dakin'- even when he is prosecuted and jailed. Most of the tribal i.e., Adivasis, educated or not, believe in this phenomenon. Just in one district, viz., Nandurbar, not less than 400 such cases occur. Most of the times no FIR is registered at the police station. The elderly people of the tribe are not even prepared to talk about it. There are 11 predominantly Adivasi districts in Maharashtra where this Dakin custom is prevalent under

various names. ANS has now initiated a comprehensive movement to fight this menace. To start with they are collecting information regarding all varieties of the custom, the number of occurrences, reasons why the branded woman is harassed, intensity of her harassment, the role being played by the Jati Panchayat, etc. Secondly they educate and train teachers, health workers, the police Patil, policemen, Anganwadi teachers and even college students from these areas. The multimedia approach for educating the public includes street plays, puppet shows, processions to create awareness, documentaries, counseling centers and public speeches. A five-year plan of action has been started by ANS to counter this menace. The objectives of the plan are: 1.To expedite registering, hearing and prosecution of the Dakin cases, 2. To give psychological support to the branded woman and her family, 3.To provide means for the family to earn their bread, 4.To remove the obstacles in the marriages of the children of such families and 5. Most importantly to rehabilitate the family in the very same village with honor, as far as possible. Large-scale public co-operation is utterly necessary here as in any reformation movement.

Female Victims of God men: These days, we see a huge increase in the number of followers of god-men known as Buvas, Babas or Swamis. The followers or devotees are predominantly women of all castes, creeds or strata of the society whether educated or not. Why are women so gullible is a point to ponder. In the conference on 'Women's Declaration' the causes of and remedial actions for the gullibility of women were discussed thoroughly. The society at present is ridden with uneasiness, helplessness and alienation. Every individual seems to be under stress and tension, more so the women. The causes are many. A woman is deprived of opportunities of social contacts, of meeting and communicating with other people. Many women of well-to-do middle class families have a feeling of emptiness and vacuum in their lives. Spending their time in the devotion to the Buvas, Babas and Swamis seems to be a satisfactory solution of the problem. Traditions have made it respectable too. Traditions of religious or spiritual types are beyond doubt and never to be questioned. In addition, these women honestly believe that their devotion is not just for their own liberation but also rather for the spiritual uplift of their untrusting or atheist husbands and young children. Their attendance at the Satsang-devotional gathering in the courts of the Babas and Buvas bestows dignity and prestige to their personality.

Equally striking is their enthusiasm in participating in religious celebrations. They would gather in thousands in the early hours to recite the 'Atharva Shirsha' during the Ganesh Festival, organize with vengeance Women's Dahihandi, participate in processions with pots on their heads, take initiative in religious rituals like Yadnyas and generally endeavour to revive many other ancient and outdated traditions in the name of preserving our sacred culture. ANS does not question their right to adhere to their faith and religious practice. But the question remains as to why these women do not show even a hundredth part of their initiative and enthusiasm towards fighting discrimination violence and injustice meted out to women? Why do they not participate in the movement for equality in social, economic and political fields for women? They do not participate in any progressive movements for reforming the society. To our women the only way of emancipation seems to be participation in religious rituals, functions, gatherings and festivals. Questioning it is a taboo! Incidentally it is also more acceptable to our men folk than the women's reservation bill.

Secondary Status Imposed by Religion on Women

All religions treat women as lesser beings as compared to men. The religions founded by prophets who are male, are naturally male oriented. They take care of the interests of the husbands and virtually imprison women within the four walls of their homes.

The Hindu religion or rather the Vedic religion is supposed to be Apaurusheya, i.e., not made by man. It has evolved over millennia of thinking by the ancient sages. It comprises of diverse philosophies, ways of worship, innumerable deities along with the 'One All Encompassing Entity called Brahma' and countless customs and rituals. But it is second to none other religion in male domination. Many Hindus claim that their religion honours women and quote the maxims like 'the hand that rocks the cradle, rules the world' or 'the deities dwell in those places where women are worshiped', etc. They proffer the examples of the erudite Gargi and Maitreyi to prove their claim that their religion does not discriminate against women. But the crux of the problem lies in how they are actually treating their women today. The treatment that is meted out to women now is illustrated in the dictums, 'a shoe deserves to be put on the foot and not on the head' or 'a broom that ought to remain in the corner of the store room cannot be seated in the drawing room'. These are but the commands issued, of course in different words, by the ancient sages and thinkers and the present Jagadgurus and other sundry god men.

One of the oft-quoted dictums of Manusmriti - a typical male chauvinist code of conduct-says, 'a woman should always remain obedient to her father in her childhood, to her husband when married and to her son in her old age. She does not deserve freedom.' And this for the exemplary Gargi-the symbol of erudition of ancient Indian women! The sage Yadnyawalkya petulantly chastises her for asking unanswerable questions and warns and curses her, 'Do not cross your limits (perhaps as a woman) Gargi, for, if you do, your head will separate from your body and fall to the ground!' Even the somewhat liberal poet of the comparatively recent past, Tulasidas confers on his own sex the license to beat their women. Says he, " Shudras, the insane, beasts and women all deserve to be beaten."

All other religions are equally high handed towards and discriminating against women. According to the Bible, God made woman for (for giving company and comfort to) man, after he made man and from the man's rib. This first woman-the Eve- committed the sin of eating the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge, because of which both Adam and Eve the first man and woman of the human race were condemned to leave paradise and live their lives on earth.' Among the Jews, a wife can be divorced on as flimsy a cause as burning a bread even if inadvertently. Among the Muslims the woman is made helpless and insecure by subjugating her in two ways. Polygamy is sanctioned and the right of a very easy divorce to the wife without alimony is bestowed on the man by the religion. According to the Jains a woman does not have enough intellect and capacity to understand the meaning and gravity of 'austerity and penance.' Gautam Buddha, one of the few ancient rationalists, too had a poor opinion of women. He did admit women into the congregation of Bhikkus as his beloved disciple, Anand, insisted on it. But he was sorry to do so, for according to him, Buddhism that was expected to last for over thousand years would, by admitting women into the 'sanghas', last for only five hundred years! Thus all religions seem determined to subjugate women.

One would argue here that all these are the things of the past. Have not our women got the right to vote in secret ballot? Have they not invaded all walks of life and displaced number of

males from their jobs? We have a number of women leading in politics, industry, business, governance and even adventurous enterprises like explorations in space. Kalpana Chawla is an excellent example to illustrate that there is no discrimination against women. The answer to this is that it's true that a few women do scale such dizzy heights. But they are exceptionally talented and have to put up a hard struggle against discrimination at every step. Swimming against the current, as do these brave women, is not possible for ordinary women. What is their lot in our society? Just look around and the subjugation of and discrimination against women sanctioned by religion and propagated by vested interests will glare into your face. Killing or aborting girl child, burning of young wives for not getting enough dowry, raping young girls and innumerable such happenings expose the outlook of our society as a whole towards women.

There is a place called Shani Shinganapur in Newasa Taluka of Maharashtra. The deity Shani presides there from a raised platform. No woman is allowed to climb up this platform. Four years ago, ANS held a big demonstration against this discrimination and insisted that women be allowed to go in the vicinity of the deity just like men. Many staunch Hindu organizations opposed ANS, tooth and nail, in the name of protecting their religion. And not surprisingly the majority of them were women. How deeply has religion enslaved women psychologically! Do women really like to be lesser human beings and remain in slavery? Certainly not. Religions have taught them to accept their lot with forbearance and without complaint. To understand this female psyche we will have to turn to the various vows and observances, rituals and ceremonies, prayers and poojas and what not that engender this female psyche. This entire endeavour is meant not for the woman's own enlightenment but for her husband, her sons, her family that is expected to give her happiness, and eventually a better life in her next birth. All these rites and rituals invented to enslave women will have to be discussed in a separate article.

Rituals, Vows and Observances that Enslave Women

Subjugating women seems to be one of the objectives of all religions. To achieve this objective they have imposed a number of rites, rituals, vows and observances on women to keep them engrossed in religious (euphemistically called spiritual) pursuits and away from the management of worldly affairs of family and public life. Religion bestows the highest honour and dignity upon those women who fulfill their natural (?) wifely and maternal roles. They are not deemed as autonomous beings, capable of interpreting religious dictums for themselves. Fighting for equality, so think the religious people, only brings disintegration of the traditional family and leads to the destruction of humanity. Even the first lady of the first nation, who does not pursue any profession of her own and is wholly engaged with her family is adored more than one who does. She is expected to appear on the public platforms only when her husband is in need of it.

Religion helped men to keep their women under their control and within the four walls of the home. This went on merrily for many centuries. However, the renaissance, the industrial revolution, the French and the American revolutions and the two world wars took place in succession, in the last five centuries and the foundation of the 'Men's World' designed by religion started shaking violently. What happened in the first and the second world (to use the current phrases,) had repercussions in later period, in the third world too. Religion reacted by reproaching women for neglecting the family and loosing their virtue and for competing with men in pursuits not meant for them by nature. To bring women back on the right path,

religions are trying to make them true Christians or Muslims or Hindus. The only way to achieve this objective is to engage them more and more in religious rituals, rites and observances. Although India is multi-religious, Hindu religion has affected the other religions to a large extent. Let us, therefore, analyse a few of the Hindu rites and rituals, so that we can understand as to how they engender a slave like psyche in the woman.

Dr. A.H. Salunkhe has examined and exposed many rituals for what they really are. One of them is the 'Tulasi Marriage'. Like all rituals, the origin of this ritual is found in a Puranic story. In fact there are several stories explaining how this ritual started. In one Tulasi happens to be a great chaste and faithful wife of a demon called Shankhachud. In the other story, too she is an equally faithful wife of another demon called Jalandhar. In both stories the demons become invincible because of the spiritual power acquired by Tulasi due to her spotless fidelity and devotion to her husband. In both, Lord Vishnu appears before her in the guise of her husband and ravishes her destroying her powers. The gods then kill the demons easily. It is not possible to recite the whole stories in this short article. (Refer to 4th vol. of *Bharateeya Sanskriti Kosh* by Pandit Mahadevshatri Joahi). But this day when a womanizing god ravished a chaste and faithful wife is commemorated and celebrated year after year, for thousands of years, by marrying Tulasi the victim to her rapacious tormenter. Of course our Purankars did not forget to weave a web of episodes in Tulasi's previous births when she pined to be Lord Vishnu's Consort, to justify his womanizing. We apologize for hurting the feelings of Vishnu Bhaktas. But should we not see through the scheming of the Purankars who are the ones who vilify and belittle our deities by their weird imagination? What does this ritual of 'Tulasi Vivah' signify? It emphasizes that a Woman's Strength lies *only* in her fidelity to her husband even if he were a demon. And secondly she should accept rape as her fate! Why do we women continue celebrating such humiliating rituals? Because we are taught, 'yours is not to ask why but to obey and comply and toil for a better life in the next birth!' Many more rituals and observances like Watapooja, Haritalika, etc., keep women immersed in religiosity or rather ritualism, so that they have no time to think of their own emancipation from the drudgery of life. Many rational thinkers like Swatnryaveer Sawarkar, Tarkateerth Lakshman Shastri Joshi who was steeped in the Vedic literature and others exposed the senselessness and mischief mongering in our rituals. Lakshman Shastri Joshi calls them acts of sorcery and conjuration performed to fulfill one's wishes.

But our women have lost level-headedness and self-confidence and live their lives under the dread of some untoward happenstance in case they fail to observe this or that ritual. Not only do they persistently observe their own family rituals but also embrace rituals of other social and cultural groups from distant places. For example Karawa Chaud is an observance of married women of North India. However due to the influence of TV serials Maharastrian women have now started observing it. On this day women don't even have a sip of water till they are offered water by their husbands after sighting the moon while the men merrily go on eating and drinking to their heart's content. The most disturbing aspect of this is that women, well educated and earning and supporting their families (and at times a lazy or drunkard husband) too observe these excruciating rituals at the cost of their health and efficiency. In addition to religious rites and rituals, customs and traditions also play their part in subjugating women. For example, the Indian woman is not supposed to utter the name of her husband and she is threatened that if she calls him by his name she will reduce his life! Quite a few gullible women even now are afraid of calling the husband by his name. By observing these rituals and vows and keeping fasts women seem to get a 'holier than thou' feeling and think they are atoning for the irreligious behaviours of other members of the family.

Here we have examined only the Hindu traditions and customs. But other religions too mete out an equal or more dreadful treatment to women. The most horrendous example is the practice of genital mutilation of young girls in some Muslim communities of Africa. Women have to conform to the orthodox codes of dress and conduct dictated by male zealots of all religions whose real agenda is the capture of power. Members of the priestly class have vested interest in keeping women on the right path so that they (the priests not women) can afford all luxuries of life and a say in politics.

These rites, rituals, vows and observances are supposed to be part of our culture that has to be preserved at all costs. It's the duty of women and not the men to carry out this responsibility. If women ignore this duty, it will cause disintegration of the traditional family. More over this religiosity engenders the feminine virtues like endurance, sacrifice, graciousness, etc., without which a woman can get no respect in the society. A self-confident woman, who sees through all this 'conjuration' and thinks for herself, is branded flippant or flirt. The woman who refuses to be 'lesser being' is not acceptable to the society. The real motive of this all is perpetuation of discrimination, patriarchy, social distortions and male domination in the name of religion.

Its high time that a rethinking of the out dated religious rites and rituals is undertaken by the society and especially women and give them up as early as possible. We should stop looking for justification for our present actions in the ancient literature. Not ancient religious scriptures but human values should guide our present behaviour. The slave like psyche of women of all religions has to be changed. One has to admit that this cannot be done in one stroke. It will rather be a slow process of incremental changes. Women have to think and chalk out their own liberation. Sane and rational men will certainly come forward to help them. The conference on 'Women's Declaration' is one step in the right direction.

Effect of Superstition on Health and Nutrition

A woman is supposed to cook and feed her family. She does it to the best of her ability but without any training in nutrition and health. She knows a little bit about traditional cooking passed on to her by her mother. Some times she makes some fancy, exotic dishes if she can afford it. But she is not trained or even informed regarding the constituents of food, their nutritional values, the different diets needed by different members of the family, etc. The buying power of an ordinary Indian family is so little that members hardly get enough to eat. Under such circumstances the housewife is the worst hit of all. Our culture tells us that a wife lives for the husband and his family. She is supposed to eat whatever is left over after every one has had his fill. The girls in the family too remain malnourished and unhealthy like their mother. The malnourished girls are married at an early age before they physically grow up into a woman. In case the young girl does not produce a son, the family blames the girl and the husband deserts her. It never occurs to any one in the family that the husband might be the guilty party. Instead of consulting a physician the poor girl is taken to a Baba who uses charms and spells and other mumbo jumbo.

In most families, no attention is given to the health of a woman or her delivery. People show little concern only when a woman is unable to do any work being very ill. It's quite natural for a woman to have much less than adequate meal or to eat whatever is left over after everyone in the family has had his fill. The malnutrition caused affects the woman in several ways.

Pregnant women are given iron tablets by the government free of charge. If the woman who cooks food for everyone in the family, is given training and information as to how to provide a square meal for all, including herself, instead of distributing pills, it will surely go a long way. Poverty of course is at the root of the problem. But one must keep in mind that poverty is not the only cause of malnutrition.

Within four to five years after a girl starts her periods, the growth of her body is complete. Generally a girl starts her periods at 12 - 13 years. That means she may marry at the age of 18 years but not before. However, girls are still married off at 15 and 16 years! Due to early marriage, especially in villages, a girl conceives and delivers at a very early age. Her womb is not grown enough to conceive. Her food intake is inadequate. The growth of the baby that is born to her is stunted as a result. In India 30% of newborn babies weigh less than 2.5 kg. The infant mortality in India is ten times that of even other developing countries, leave alone comparing it with developed countries. Five hundred out of a lakh of women die during delivery in India while in other developing countries the figure is 20!

Woman's health in this country is no doubt very much neglected but the point here is how all these things make her helpless and prone to be superstitious. She takes resort to vows and observances to overcome her chronic physical and mental afflictions, which are in reality caused by malnutrition. Many times the cause of her chronic illness is taken to be a spell and a lot of time, effort and money are spent on Devrishis or sorcerers. The responsibilities of married life weigh down on her immature body and mind, as she is married at a very early age. The fear of her or her baby's death during delivery constantly gnaws at her. All this causes mild or severe mental illness, which of course is taken to be an attack by a ghost and usual measures are taken to repel the spell cast by them. These conditions of a woman's life form the material foundation of her superstitious psyche.

Most women are under continuous mental strain for various reasons; the husband does not love or the mother-in-law harasses or recognition and prestige are lacking or there is no harmony in the family or lack of satisfaction in sexual life and so on. The strain causes a split in personality of the woman that is related to specific period, place and person. For example, at the temples of Ambabai and Dattatray one finds many possessed women and it is generally not pretence. It is either a deep state of self-hypnosis or mild mental illness - hysteria. Hysteria is an incidental affliction. The patient suffers from palpitation, shivering and twitching of the body, feeling of being choked or of chest being compressed. All these are mental disorders. The patient gets used to it, that is, it stops for a while but re-emerges before long. It may not be cured completely even after medical treatment because more than the treatment what is needed is to change the situation that has caused it in the first place. If the harassment by the mother-in-law or the addiction of the husband remains unchanged, the illness recurs. Sometimes, on the other hand, the patient is cured spontaneously or because of the positive suggestions given by the sorcerers and the patient and her relatives are convinced that it surely was an affliction caused by a ghost or spirit. Other symptoms like sudden lassitude of limbs, blindness despite perfectly healthy eyesight, becoming dumb with vocal apparatus intact, etc. is characteristics of the disease called hysterical convulsions. Any cure for this disease brought about by means other than medical treatment, has a dramatic effect on people and strengthens their belief in supernatural powers. Along with the approval of tradition, sense-excitation and self-hypnosis, a woman feels she is possessed and begins puffing and panting for hours, becomes insensitive to physical pain, starts talking in a strange language. Ignorance of scientific reasons behind these phenomena increase the mystery and consequently gives a boost to superstition.

Ignorance and poverty are necessarily accompanied by disease and superstition. These unfortunate malnourished women and the members of their family fall pray to many easily avoidable diseases. Lack of cleanliness causes skin diseases, which are widespread in the rural areas. Similarly common are occurrences like premature deliveries, child mortality, deaths during childbirth or pregnancy and so on. Even the small countries like Srilanka and Bangladesh have been able to reduce child mortality much more than in our country. No wonder that women surrounded by so many adversities- malnutrition, neglect in childhood, ignorance, early pregnancies, deliveries without any medical help, rigors of bringing up the children and facing responsibilities without receiving proper training and education-become victims of superstition. Solution to the problem of superstition involves solving all these related problems and should find a place in 'Women's declaration' on eradication of superstition.

Comprehensive Social Change

The plan of action, per se, for eradication of superstition that our womenfolk are plagued with, will not be successful unless it becomes a part and parcel of an action plan for a radical and comprehensive social change. This is the stand of ANS when it undertakes any programme for eradication of superstition in women. Take for example the custom of **Dakin**. This evil practice will not go away just by undertaking a movement for awakening and making people aware of the damage it causes to the society. Even fighting against the perpetrators of this evil and bringing them to books, will not achieve much. We have to go to the roots of the menace, which lie deep in the socio-cultural-economic milieu of the Adivasis. Even today 70 to 80 % of Adivasi women are illiterate. Infant mortality is much higher than in other parts of the country. There is widespread malnourishment coupled with hardly any prospect of employment or any other means of earning ones livelihood. No one can blame a woman in such impossible conditions if she easily falls prey to the Dakin menace. A comprehensive movement to bring about a radical change in the conditions in which an Adivasi woman lives is necessary. She has to be educated, assured that her children will survive; health facilities have to be provided for her and her family; opportunities of jobs or self employment have to be created and most important of all, the life long subordination and submissiveness imposed on her by the system has to be completely done away with, as soon as possible and at all levels. Our present male-dominating society has created and nursed the attitude of submission and surrender in women and taught them to be proud of it.

Raising a family, in fact, is a strenuous job full of responsibilities, challenges and all kinds of hazards. But the woman, including the Adivasi woman, has been doing it to the best of her ability for several centuries. How ever no one had thought of developing a training course for this huge responsibility. Home Science has become a subject of study only recently and only the elite have an access to it. An ordinary woman has no access to any such training. In addition, her movement is restricted within the four walls of the house and she is expected to cope with this huge responsibility all on her own, without any exposure to the outside world and the development taking place there. She must produce at least one son. If she does not, she is blamed even though science has proved that it is the man and not the woman who is responsible for determining the gender of the offspring. In spite of the entire advance in scientific knowledge, the woman is taken to a Baba who is supposed to bless her with a son by giving her some 'Prasad' to eat. The 'Poonsavan' ritual or the 'Putrakameshthi Yadnya' is

also performed in her name and she is squarely blamed if a male child is not born after all these efforts. Only a concerted effort made with all our might to spread knowledge can haul the woman up from this mire.

In Kerala women's literacy is almost cent percent. Its positive effects are evident everywhere. But women's literacy devoid of any relevant improvement in the psycho-social milieu is of no help. Female literacy is certainly necessary for social change but mere increase in literacy will not automatically bring about the desired change. Among the Jain community, where female literacy is 90%, there are only 870 females per 1000 males. When the birth of a girl child is so unwelcome, she has no other way but to take recourse to superstition for her very survival in her later life as a woman.

There is a ray of hope in this dismal picture of enslavement of women. A farmers' organization called, 'Shetakari Snghatana', led by Sharad Joshi in Maharashtra, made a novel experiment. The farmers put their wives' names on the documents of ownership of the land, called, 'Sat Bara Utara'. This gave their women a firm economic standing insuring their right to the farmland even in the future. This is a sure way of diverting her away from superstition. In Gujarat the organization started by Ila Bhat, has organized the self-employed women and developed tremendous confidence in them. They now own and run their own bank, where they have an easy access to small credits and small installments to repay. They repay their debts promptly and almost never default. The 'Annapoorna' organization in Maharashtra provides respectable self-employment opportunities to women. These self-empowered and self-dependent women are a big asset to bringing about transformation in the society. Their self-confidence will surely take them away from superstition. 50 % reservation for women in all walks of life will hasten this process considerably.

Plan of Action

The main objective of the conference held at Latur, on the 27th and 28th of November 2004, was to draw a plan of action to eradicate superstition from amongst women. The plan spelt out in details in the 'Women's Declaration on Eradication of Superstition Prevailing in Women', at the end of the conference. A few important points in this connection are listed below.

1. To eradicate superstition from the minds of women, it is necessary to awaken and educate our men regarding this menace and even prepare a code of conduct for them, so that they stop dominating over their women.
2. Women should not only get education at all levels according to their choice. Their education should be such that they become alert and discerning. It should make them inquisitive and fearless.
3. The law prohibiting the practice of witchcraft, sorcery and similar superstitions should be strictly executed. Similarly all other laws concerning women should be strictly followed and effectively executed with a humane approach towards the victimized women.
4. Society should establish appropriate norms for the police and the media regarding their approach towards women.
5. Efforts should be made to instil gender equality in the family and the society. All the customs and traditions that approve and respect gender chauvinism should be rejected

and the government as well as the media should oppose such practice as a matter of policy.

6. A friendly milieu should be developed in the society. Whenever hatred and violence are on the increase, women's freedom is restricted automatically. The loss of freedom, then, pushes them towards superstition.
7. Educational institutions should take a firm stand against attitudes, notions and opinions that are out and out superstitious.
8. Most important of all, all of us should make concerted efforts to instil a healthy critical outlook on Religion instead of blind faith. In Maharashtra there has been a long chain of reformers like Justice Ranade, Viththal Ramji Shinde, Mahatma Phule, Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar and Gadge Baba. All these great men and many others have distinguished and explained the emotional, moral and behavioural content of religion in order to develop a sensible attitude towards one's beliefs. Such an attitude is utterly necessary to put an end to the spread of superstition.

Lighthouses in the Dark Seas

The Americans considered the fall of the Communist regime in Russia as the 'End of History'. The USA became the unchallenged world power without any rival or any danger from any quarter of the world. But soon the unimaginable aerial attack on the World Trade Center was perpetrated and thus introduced one more chapter in history with no end in sight. The Big Fight now is between the so-called civilized world that stands for globalization, market economy, and the IPR regime (i.e., interest of America mainly and the remaining western world subsequently) on one hand and on the other international terrorism mainly supported by Islamic fanaticism. Both the antagonists in this Big Fight are equally irrational and leave no room for any dialogue with each other. Both show little concern for Humanity and Humanist values! Parochial nationalism coupled with religious fanaticism is playing havoc with humanity in almost all countries of the world. Is there a way out of this chaos? Can we create a safer and rational world?

The task is stupendous but not impossible. It can be achieved, of course through a long struggle, spread over generations if human beings adopt a rational way of life. With this aim in mind, the author of this book, Dr.D.D.Bandiste attempts to present Rationalism in the 'right perspective' in a straightforward, simple and lucid manner.

Rationalism is a mundane philosophy devoid of any Meta Ethics or religious commandments. It is a science of conduct rooted in emotion and guided by intelligence and like all true sciences is always provisional and tentative without dogma. It rejects transcendental ethics and the absolutistic objectives associated with it. Its foundation is empirical knowledge through perception, observation, experience, experimentation and inference. This includes not only what is experienced now and in the past but also all that can be **logically** imagined to exist now and in the future. Instead of faith in god and depending on him to provide every thing, a rationalist would rather have confidence in himself and his abilities and depend on his own efforts. It has faith in basic things like one's own existence, existence of the external world, trustworthiness of our sense organs and above all he believes in the intrinsic human rationality. This becomes evident every time we try to justify our choice giving verifiable proofs (even for irrational beliefs like existence of ghosts, Bhanamati etc.)

Rational ethics includes Universal Brotherhood not because we all are creatures of god but because of this innate rationality. Rationalism has a positive programme of inculcating humanist values, i.e., freedom, human dignity, compassion, co-operation, purity of means and conservation of environment. Rationalism is not hedonism as many religionist and

transcendental philosophies project it to be. It is very much against crass consumerism because it accepts the responsibility of preserving the natural bounties for the next generations and also all the generations to come. So it opposes all economic prosperity that will mortgage our future generations.

Rationalism is not a modern concept as is generally supposed to be. It is as ancient as our civilization. It was clearly enunciated by Socrates and Buddha and even earlier by the Charwaks. But the rationalist characteristic of their philosophies was never highlighted either due to misinterpretation and negligence or by design by the interested parties. The Charwaks were branded as hedonists. For Socrates 'knowledge (wisdom), morality and courage could not be dissociated from each other. So he preferred to drink the poison and die in the jail instead of escaping to save his life. And what was his crime? It was awakening the youth from their slumber. As for the Buddha, he did not preach any new Prophetic religion with revealed knowledge and absolute truth as such. He preached rather a new rational morality. He told people to be their own light, i.e., to depend on their own wisdom and effort. As opposed to this, Shankaracharya wanted people to realize that they are the absolute Brahman while Ramanuja stressed the total dependence of man on god. Christ insists that human beings are sinners by birth and should endeavor throughout their life to cleanse themselves of this stigma through repentance, penance and observing rituals in the service of god. Thus rationalism and religion are two ways of life contrary to each other but equally ancient.

We have to make a choice between these two paths. One is of meditation, observing rituals, undergoing penance and suffering, worshiping and praying god, surrendering to him completely and waiting for his favour to clear our way to heaven, Swarga, Brahma or god himself. The other is to think about our mundane life and its problems, how to solve them through our own efforts not waiting for any Awatar to fight the evil powers and use our own wisdom to make the life on earth safer and happier for not only our self and our country but for the whole of humanity.

Dr. Bandishte insists that the latter is the only path that will ensure our survival, which he explains in the last two chapters, viz., 'Fears and Hopes' and 'A Rational Alternative to Religion. Especially in the Rational Alternative to Religion he adopts the style of Socrates like conversation and very lucidly shows the contrast between religion and rationalism and explains how mankind needs the latter in order to replace the former.

The Rational Alternative consists of two thrusts mainly: Rational outlook and a humanist programme. They are interlinked at every stage. We should realize that no one is born religious at birth and it is not an instinctive tendency despite a widespread belief to the contrary. Man is born with a doubting mind and a thirst for knowledge which fact has made him surpass all other species. Even religion is born out of man's reflection and cogitation but invariably it soon becomes a static dogma. It promises grand but fictitious gains. Wisdom, however, lies in pursuing small but real gains. People tend to equate religion with morality and a cultured life and consequently think that rationality is devoid of both morality and culture. Culture and morality are almost identical since both aim to make good things better. A cultured life means an enlightened and morally noble life like that of Socrates. Culture adds an esthetic dimension to morality. It means a continued moral and cultural progress of humanity. Since religious morality and culture are strangled by dogma, only a rational morality and culture are capable of continuous progress.

People are afraid that when religion is relegated to a very narrow field of strictly personal faith and conduct, rituals and celebrations, functions and ceremonies and pilgrimages will have no place in the religious-cultural life of the society. It would be rendered too dry and rigid then. Dr. Bandishte assuages this fear by saying, 'surely there will be occasions of rejoicing but with a difference. Pilgrimages will be to scientific laboratories, factories, spots of natural beauty and the like. Birth and death anniversaries of persons who

have spread kindly spirit and enlightenment in the society will be celebrated. Not kings and generals but our heroes would be rather those who have made our society cultured and enlightened.'

It is common knowledge that every orthodox religionist is convinced that reformation is certainly needed but needed not in 'his creed'. It is utterly necessary in all creeds other than his own. So to say that when Hindus become good Hindus, Muslims good Muslims and so on, i.e., when people follow their own religion religiously, all tensions and conflicts would cease, is to live in a fool's paradise. That is what, religion in fact, is! Bertrand Russell has suggested in his "Skeptical Essays", '... diminish the income of clairvoyants, book makers, bishops and others who live on the irrational hopes of those who have done nothing to deserve good fortune here or hereafter.'

So the rational alternative to religion is to tackle our own problems of human survival and welfare, problems like communal riots, senseless militancy, unemployment, displacement of large chunks of humanity due to natural and man made calamities, etc. Without going to their roots, parties and individuals form their opinions. And to gather more converts to their opinion they persuade people to think that other parties or individuals (political, religious or ideological) are wicked, immoral, hostile to their interests and also against human nature. They can thereby cover up their own vested interest and add heat and passion to all types of controversies, especially religious ones. Only inculcating rationality in the populations of the world can curb such tendencies. This is the tremendous task before the rationalists and Dr. Bandishte has tried to put it across very lucidly. Let us hope that this will induce at least a few people to become their 'Own Light' and choose the right path. May this movement, once started, grow far and wide, for, that is the only hope for Humanity!

Dr. Narendra Dabholkar

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THOUGHT & ACTION

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THE WORLD AS I SEE IT

How strange is the lot of us mortals! Each of us is here for a brief sojourn; for what purpose we know not, though sometimes we think we sense it. But without deeper reflection one knows from daily life that one exists for other people first of all for those upon whose smiles and well-being our own happiness is wholly dependent, and then for many, unknown to us to whose destinies we are bound by sympathy. A hundred times every day I remind myself that my inner and outer life are based on labours of other people, living and dead, and that I must exert myself in order to give in the same measure as I have received and am still receiving. I am strongly drawn to frugal life and am often oppressively aware that I am engrossing an undue amount of labour of my fellow men. I regard class distinctions as unjustified and, in the last resort, based on force. I also believe that a simple and unassuming life is good for everybody, physically and mentally.

- Albert Einstein

In This Issue

Do We Need a Soul? Milind Watave	Impressions of a Pakistani Professor Pervez Hoodbhoy
Bank of Heaven Anuradha Bhagwat	Oil - Water Baba Prof: Kiran Sagar
Vidnyanvahini Pushpa Deshpande	Homeopathy: Science or Pseudo Science? Laxmidas Khatau

DO WE NEED A SOUL?

A human being has a soul and even if he dies the soul does not die. It simply discards one body and acquires a new one just as he discards his old clothes and puts on new ones. The deeds done in this birth decides where he will be placed in the next birth.

This is dinned into our heads right from our childhood. From where do these concepts, right or wrong, originate? Why should someone have thought about it in the first place? Although it is difficult to reach the roots of this concept, people all over the world believe in the existence of the soul. Their notions regarding what happens to it after death or when does it enter the body differ. There had been philosophies that denied its existence since the ancient times but by and large vast masses do believe that it does exist.

Archeologists have uncovered skeletons of human beings buried sixty thousand years ago. There they found plenty of pollens in the mud in which the bodies were buried. Even in that time men gave a proper burial rite with flowers and all, to their dead relatives, may be either for the use of the dead man's soul or to appease it. Thus the roots of this concept can be traced back to sixty thousand years.

Is man alone blessed with the soul or do all living beings possess a soul is a disputed point. According to the Hindus the soul can be reborn in any of the eighty four lakhs species of animals. But many western and other people Think otherwise. The western opinion is predominantly considered here because modern science and especially the biological science are born out of the western philosophical background. Had this philosophy not considered the non-human organisms as nothing more than machines, the tremendous progress in biological science would not have occurred. Do we need to conceive a force that is beyond the natural laws for regulating all the processes that occur in an organism? In other words can we not assume that such complex processes depend completely on the natural physical and chemical forces without interposing any force or agency beyond them?

Except for the virus, all living organisms are made up of cells. Many of them are single celled animals while the rest are multi-cellular viruses. A human body consists of 10^{14} cells, each of which is a live cell. One can take a few such cells to the laboratory and raise and multiply them there. Each cell can remain alive, grow and divide independently there. Innumerable organisms can be created out of such cells. So a cell can be considered a unit in order to study life as such. Studying the structure and functions of a cell forms a large part of research in biology today. It reveals that all the processes that take place in the cell are in accordance with the laws laid down in the physical and chemical sciences. No other force is required for carrying them out. The best evidence for this is the fact that the chain of all processes that take place in a cell can be duplicated in a test tube even in the absence of a living cell. But surely this chain of processes does not mean a live cell itself. Innumerable such processes are carried on in a cell; they all are related to each other, and they are well organized. How is this total function organized and regulated? Are the physical and chemical laws enough to do this? If we are able to build a living cell from lifeless matter, no other evidence is needed to prove this. We are not able to achieve this right now. But, let us see if it is possible to develop a live cell from lifeless matter theoretically.

The temperature of a human being is usually 35° to 37° Celsius. When it is lowered to 0° Celsius, the human being will die. Every living being needs certain temperature to remain alive. Suppose we lower the temperature of a cell that lives at 30° degrees by 300° , i.e., to -270° C, we think that the cell will certainly die. This is not just imagination. It has been carried out in the laboratory. Theoretically -273° is the lowest possible temperature. So it is called the absolute 0° temperature. We can reach nearer to this temperature by using liquid hydrogen or liquid helium. Experiments to freeze cells to near absolute zero have been successfully conducted.

But what is temperature after all? The average of all the movements and vibrations of all the atoms in a substance can be called its temperature. If these movements and vibrations increase, we say the temperature has increased. Cooling the substance means reducing the movement and vibrations of its atoms. At 2° to 3° , i.e., near absolute zero, they are reduced to almost nothing. The cell too, is not an exception to this rule. At this stage all the movements and processes in the cell come to a stand still. Is the cell now alive? We define life by certain properties of it. All these properties are functional in nature. Since no processes can go on at this stage, there is no question of regulating them. What remains then is pure structure.

Structure and function are two indivisible constituents of any machine or any organism. Although they are indivisible, we learned just now that there could be pure structure without any function. But the opposite of it that is function without structure is impossible. But if this cell that is pure structure without any function is warmed up to its normal temperature, what we notice is that it starts behaving like a normal cell showing all the properties of life, as if nothing had happened in the meanwhile. All the complex processes start once again with the same complexity and the same well organized manner. The frozen cell had the structure but no energy, no force. When we warmed it, we gave it energy from out side with no instructions as to how to use that energy. Yet all the functions and processes were restarted in the same planned and regulated manner. Does it mean that there is some separate regulating force or energy?

There is no need to assume such a separate force or energy. We can explain this without assuming such a force. For example, a computer or an automatic machine starts functioning on pressing a button, which lets an electric current pass through it. We give it energy but not the instructions for using it. In the absence of power supply the machine has only structure but no function. The function starts as soon as the electric supply is restored. The electric current does not run helter skelter. It runs appropriately and carries out its given functions. Here, who decides how to use the electric power that is supplied? It is decided by the structure of the machine.

The same logic can be applied to the frozen cell. The structure of the cell contains the information as to how to use the energy that is given to it. The structure regulates the processes. If an unorganized group of atoms is given energy the atoms move incoherently. On restricting its freedom these movement will be regularized and specific processes only will occur. Two atoms bound by chemical bond are not as free as two unbound atoms. A double bond will restrict their independence all the more. The atoms of a large molecule are much more severely restricted. The same thing occurs in a cell on a yet larger scale. The structure of a cell is so complex and yet so unerring that all the movements of every atom in the cell are so specifically regulated that each movement can produce only a specific process. This means that the information as to how to use the energy supplied from outside is contained in the structure of the cell itself. There is no need of a separate entity to regulate its functions.

Yet another conclusion can be drawn from this experiment at near absolute zero temperature. Suppose we freeze free atoms to two degrees absolute temperature and organize and bind them as in a cell, in short, make an exact model of a cell, it will be a model made out of nonliving matter. What would happen if this model is warmed by giving energy up to the normal body temperature? No doubt it will behave like a living cell. Since its structure is exactly like that of a cell, the processes occurring in it would also be that like a cell. Thus if we succeed in building a cell structure at near absolute zero temperature, we can bring it to life without putting any soul into it. Give it energy from without and it will come alive. This way we can make a living organism from completely nonliving matter in the laboratories.

So far we have not succeeded in doing so. But it is only a matter of advance in technology that we have yet to acquire. We also do not yet know the detailed structure of a cell in its entirety. But we are able to structure big and small molecules that carry out important processes of a cell. The technology of making proteins or DNA is advancing fast. I am quite confident that in less than two centuries man will be able to make living cells. Then the dilemma of soul will finally be

buried. Even today experiments strongly support the opinion that the structure of the cell and not any controlling entity regulates its functions.

If the properties of a cell are determined by its structure, then change in the structure should change its properties too. This is what happens. The changes that occur in the DNA do bring about changes in the characteristics of the organism. They are called mutations. Such changes in the DNA do occur by chance in nature. Many changes are destructive, some others cause no perceptible change, while a few are favorable and make the organism more fit to survive. These mutations make the process of evolution possible. Mutations can also be brought about in the laboratory. The technology of causing mutation exactly at the required place and bringing about the necessary changes are advancing fast. Today we can transfer a characteristic of one organism to another of a different species. For example; human body can form insulin naturally. Microbes do not make insulin. But when the genes that are responsible to make insulin in human beings are fitted into the DNA of a microbe, that organism starts making insulin.

This technology certainly proves a boon to medicine. There are plenty of examples of such structural change in cells. The change need not necessarily occur in the structure of the DNA. Since the discovery of the structure of the DNA, for nearly last four decades, it alone was considered to be responsible for determining the characteristics of an organism. And all the research in this connection was concentrated on it. Meanwhile a small group of scientists brought to light a few other things. They noticed that characteristics of an organism change without bringing about any change in its DNA. More over this change is inherited too.

This is how it is achieved. With some chemical processes the cell wall of a microbe is removed. When one is successful in removing it completely, the microbes of next several generations do not form any cell walls. The cells grow without cell walls although the genes that are responsible for making cell walls are in tact. Compounds made out of information taken from the DNA form the molecules that are necessary for making the cell wall. These molecules attach themselves on the walls of the cell at appropriate places. But in the absence of a cell wall the molecules are wasted and eventually the process comes to a stand still. Thus in this case although the information stored in the DNA is intact, the cell walls cannot be formed. There are many more such examples and scientists now believe that not just the DNA but also the whole structure of the cell is responsible for heredity. In short the structure of the cell brings it to life. There is no need for any force or energy but the physical and chemical constituents of the cell. Biologists firmly believe this. However the fact remains that although there is no need of a force, the absence of such need does not prove that no such force exists.

But it is possible to show that a soul or a life force beyond the natural laws just cannot exist. The logic is not difficult to understand. That the processes that go on in the living organisms are physical is beyond doubt. The moot point is whether there exists a metaphysical force that regulates these processes. Now what exactly does regulating a physical process mean? It means starting the process or bringing it to a halt or changing its direction. For any of these actions we will need force. But applying force is but a physical process. So regulating too ought to be a physical process. How can a thing that is not physical apply any physical force and regulate any processes?

Daniel Dennet explains this with an interesting example. He says that in all ghost stories, invariably there happens to be a phenomenon where a ghost passes through a wall and picks up a dagger from the table. How illogical! The property that enables the ghost to pass through a solid wall will make its fingers too pass through the dagger and render him incapable of lifting it. Our concept of the soul is similarly illogical. The soul that is not physical cannot regulate any physical objects. If it does regulate any such objects it ought to use physical force. This physical force can be demonstrated and measured by physical experiments. The thing that is demonstrated by such experiments ought to be physical (or material).

Earlier we contested the existence of a metaphysical force that is needed to regulate the processes of an organism. Now we are going one step further and maintain that it is

theoretically impossible for any such force to exist and regulate the processes that take place in the living organism.

The purpose of elaborating this stand is to convince the Indian readers. The western mind can easily understand it since they traditionally believe that all non-human organisms are like machines. The Indian mind, on the contrary believes that even the simplest and the smallest organism too has a soul. More over the quality of the soul remains the same all through out. After all the same soul rotates through eighty four lakhs of '*Yonis*' (i.e., as many species.)

You can imagine what happens when a student like me, believing in the eternal soul starts studying biology minutely. The diversity found in the species of organisms is astonishing but does not create any theoretical problem. Even the unicellular organisms like bacteria or the viruses that possess souls like us, do not pose a problem. Where does this soul dwell? In the human beings this enigma is crammed into the soul or the brain. It is crammed into the nucleus of the unicellular organism since the textbooks teach us that the nucleus of the cell controls all its activities. When it is revealed to us what this nucleus is made of, we look at the DNA molecules as the all-powerful organizer-regulator. Next we learn the structure and the functioning of the DNA itself and every thing flies off the center because now we know that the DNA that was for us an enigmatic center all this time, is nothing but information that can be copied again and again. Neither does it control nor does it regulate any process. On the contrary there are many a gene regulation mechanisms in the cell that controls the DNA. They have been studied minutely. It is concluded that all the regulation takes place in accordance with physical principles. Moreover there is no one entity that can be considered as the sole controller. The deeper you go the more convinced you get that the overall structure is the regulator.

There are more reasons to deny the existence of the soul that rotates through 84lak species and discard the physical bodies like old clothes. Let us accept for a moment that all living things including the unicellular organisms have a soul or a life force or something similar to it. Now the question arises from where does the second soul materialize when a cell divides into two? Does the soul duplicate itself? When exactly does a soul enter into this unicellular organism during the cell division? In the vegetable kingdom one tree produces innumerable seeds. Each is capable of growing into a big tree. Moreover these days a new tree can be produced from every cell of a tree. When and from where does a soul or a life force enter into each of them? There is no logical answer to any of these questions.

The statements made on the basis of experiments conducted on the unicellular organisms can be applied to multi-cellular complex organisms with a little difference in the details. These experiments have been successfully conducted on simple multi-cellular organisms. Of course no one has succeeded in freezing a whole human being and bringing him back to life. But the reasons are rather technical. Small groups of cells can be frozen but freezing a whole big animal is technically not possible because temperature has to be reduced at a particular rate and evenly all over. If the cooling is uneven big crystals of ice are formed, which burst the cells. The structure of the multi-cellular animals including man is much more complex but they have all evolved from the unicellular organisms. Therefore since the physical-chemical constituents can establish the life in the cell it is logical to apply the same law to multi-cellular animals. To day it is not possible for science to explain all processes in their minute details. There still are many enigmas. But scientists are confident of solving them. Moreover assuming the existence of an entity that cannot be proved may seem to solve many a puzzle. For instance in the last century to solve the difficulties that appeared in formulating the theory of light waves scientists assumed the existence of ether, which no body could prove. Later on Einstein threw this theory to withering. Assumption of a soul in every organism seems to solve all problems regarding regulation of life processes. But having no problems means the end of the quest of knowledge. Therefore keeping the problems alive is important. They should not be buried in the pit of an imaginary soul. We will find their answers tomorrow if not today.

In short although we have yet to make vast progress in the biological science, we still can firmly state that physical-chemical processes regulate life. The thing that brings life into the organisms is its structure. And structure is material. So the difference between living and non-living is material and not vital. Lifeless objects too have energy. But how to utilize the energy is decided by the material structure. The material structure therefore is the soul of the living organisms.

Milind Watave

(Translated from Marathi Monthly Aajacha Sudharak by Suman Oak)

BANK OF HEAVEN

Does this name for a bank, Bank of Heaven, sound strange? But it is true. Some of the religious institutions like temple trusts and places of pilgrimages, of all religions and sects, have so much cash funds that they could finance our country's fiscal needs, many times over! In fact some significant politicians have opined that the government should take money out of these religious institutions instead of soliciting foreign direct investments at higher rates.

A recent survey has shown that the Tirumala Devasthan in Tirupati is the richest of the temple trusts. The Golden Temple in Amritsar generates funds and is even politically connected in Punjab. The Ajmer Sharif in Ajmer, the Vaishnodevi in Jammu, the Sidhivinayak temple in Mumbai, the Saibaba Sansthan in Shirdi and many others, routinely employ professional chartered accountants and financial experts to manage their finances. Most of them even file income tax returns, although they may be exempt from paying taxes as such.

A recent report in the Indian Express states that - the Saibaba Sansthan in Shirdi is a cash cow whose activities are overseen by a trust packed with politicians. Sitting on a cash reserves totaling Rs. 200 crores, the Sansthan runs a big hospital, a 560-room lodging facility besides several schools.

It is known that in all most all religions, there is a practice of appeasing the higher beings, in case of problems. The appeasements are in the forms of cash (*daan* in the *daan peti*), prasad, flowers, coconut, and what not. All these activities generate cash. And do not forget the money generated by keepers minding your foot wears, cameras and what nots. In some places you need to wear headscarves, long attires, saris and other traditional stuff, which can be hired out. The sale of pictures, idols and gemstones and publications, gives other wider avenues for commerce.

We tend to bribe the higher beings so that they perform some miracles to extricate us out of our day to day problems – be it passing in exams, getting a good husband for a daughter, a promotion, health problems of family members, business not doing well, and the list is long. Politicians are known to patronize godmen who pretend to be agents for the gods, so that they win elections and in the process aggrandize more wealth in the name of serving the society.

Commerce in the name of religion generates large amounts of money. In fact it is known that sale of *laddoos* and shodden hair at Tirupati aggregates crores of rupees each year. It is known that most of these trusts do fund educational institutions, schools, and hospitals, feed the poor and do many other socially relevant, charitable activities. This is commendable. But there is more. Not all their activities are holy, pious and charitable. And the educational institutions that are run by them, the universities, the *gurukuls*, all tend to be inward or backward looking and orthodox; not promoting a scientific temper and spirit of inquiry among the young interns. This is nothing but harmful for the society.

Visit any of the famous Indian temples on the foot hills of the Himalayas, go to Puri and visit the Lord Jagannath temple, go to any of the temples in the South, see the Kashi Vishwanath temple - you see so much wealth (and greed) that it is a shock to your belief that religious minded are frugal in nature. The Vaishnodevi temple has a private helipad for the rich and the famous to

land on – avoiding the drudgery of climbing the steep hill. The temples in Badrinath, Kedarthan, Puri and even Tirupati have rates for rows during the *aartis*. The first row tickets are sold for few thousands of rupees. The mass followers have to view the *pujas* and the *aartis* from afar, see the video screens and satisfy themselves of the *darshans*. When I visited the Puri Jagannath, as a tourist and out of utter curiosity, and did not abide by the custom of buying sweets from a shop recommended by a panda or touch his feet, he forcibly yanked my head down!! I was so shocked that I couldn't believe what was happening. And imagine what must be happening to weak, helpless people who have complete faith in these pandas – the agents of gods!

The concern, for the conscientious minded citizens is that there is no way of knowing the source of the money that is getting into the system, through the garb of religion. Are illegal finances using these channels? Instead of Bank of Heaven, should these be called as Bank of Haven? Also, since most of these religious funds come under charitable organizations and people making contributions can even get tax exemptions; there is a financial loss for the government from many fronts. The matter is serious and needs to be considered by a responsible, democratic and accountable government.

Another issue that should be considered is that politics and piety have become pretty pally. Politicians and holy men have become strange bed fellows, creating problems for our society and hampering the progress of the country. Politicians of all shades, shapes and sizes, seem to patronize particular god-men. This, when the idea of fostering scientific temper has been enshrined in the constitution! Besides this deadly concoction, there is tremendous amount of money fuelling politics and piety, turn by turn. We have seen how the Golden Temple was a hide out for militants, the Baramullah mosque was used by separatists, and the Akshardham temple had its share of unholy gun fight within the temple precincts.

The alarm bells started ringing when recently the Kanchi Shankaracharya had been accused of murder and the intent of the Tamil Nadu state government to take over the temple and its functioning (read finances!). But the money from religious places probably always finds its way to politics. The cash-rich Shiromani Gurudwara Prabhandak Committee is often seen as a controller of the Akali Dal politics. The government of Maharashtra has control over the Shirdi temple trust.

Let us now have a look at these godmen who hold the politicians on a string – puppet on strings (or is it the other way round? Do politicians use the godmen as a ruse or a façade for their corrupt deeds? It would be interesting to find out). Politicians approach these godmen for auspicious timings for swearing in ceremonies; consult them for selecting their cabinet colleagues and what have you. The Chanakya of Indian politics, Mr. PV Narasimharao often consulted with Chadraswami, who was embroiled in a forgery case. Indira Gandhi was close to her *yoga guru* Dharendra Bramhachari, who amassed so much wealth that he even had a private airstrip. Some frugal living this! Lets not forget that a Bhagwan in our own backyard, Bhagwan Rajneesh, who held sway over many a luminaries including famous film stars. He amassed so much wealth, selling Indian spiritualism to the burnt out westerners, that he even boasted of having seventeen to eighteen custom made Rolls-Royces, which were flown around the world, along with him wherever he went.

The recent guidelines by the election commission to de-link politics and religion, is a good sign of a mature democracy. We have seen first hand, how religion (and its funds from the Bank of Heaven) is misused by politicians to misguide and loot the general public. If religion is not touted as an issue, the *mandir- masjid* issues will not get worked up in the minds of innocent people, leading to a religious frenzy and militancy. If we follow the mature democracy of the west, election issues should be about welfare of the society - education, jobs, health, water, sanitation, etc. And not use religion as an antidote, diversion and opium (blindfold too?) for all the problems.

Some of these religious institutions have so much clout, financially and politically, that it is feared that India's unique brand of secularism is at stake. Religion has become a big business.

Managing religious trusts, appointing the trustees to manage and oversee the funds, appointing priests and other administrative staff in a religious institution. In a recent newspaper article published in the Indian Express, it is commented that – there is something amiss when a secular state gets into the business of appointing priests, regulating *pujas* and taking over temples.

It seems some state governments even have departments that proclaim to promote religious activities! We should take solace that the government does not have a minister of religion in the cabinet!!

These days the funds from religious trusts are finding their way into stock markets and venture capitalism also. Recently, I met a person whose new educational venture had been funded by a temple trust. And he was of course propounding and developing educational material that was propagating the 'science' of religion that was in line with the funding organization.

Now what is the solution? How does the country come out from the grips of religious institutions, their commerce, the politicians and the vicious spiral that everyone gets caught in? Where is the progress? How will the average masses develop a right rational, scientific temper? The scene is bleak. The only solution is through right education and faith in the coming generation that they will have the intellect to call what is bogus as bogus and nothing else.

Anuradha Bhagwat

VIDNYANVAHINI: SCIENCE ON WHEELS

Vidnyanvahini's Mobile Science Laboratory (MSL) started roaming on the streets of rural Maharashtra ten years ago on January 16, 1995. My husband Dr. Madhukar Deshpande and I conceived of this idea while we were still living in USA till 1994. United States was our home for about 28 years. Both of us were in teaching profession which we loved. We had seen in USA that even small village schools had beautiful buildings and fairly well equipped labs for the students to do experiments and learn science. In India, cities have schools with good libraries and other resource material. Yet, in science education, learning by doing experiments is not considered an important aspect for the students. We wanted to return to "Swades" to do something about this and in 1994 we took that step, since by then our children were married and settled in their careers. Initially we thought of buying a Maruti van and going in it to schools with a bagful of science experiment kits. But after talking to a friend Dr. J.K.Wani of Maharashtra Sewa Samiti, Calgary, Canada, we submitted a formal proposal to Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). With our seed money and CIDA's grant, we could think of a Tata 609 bus chassis on which we fabricated our MSL. The donation by these 2 agencies lasted only for 3 yrs. After that we had to raise funding which we did with the help of our friends. We had contacted our scientist friends Jayant Phalke and Dr. Manohar Dixit before arriving in Pune and talked to them about our plan. They too readily agreed to join us and participate.

In two to three months' time, we settled down in our new home in Pune after a 24-year stint with life in the United States. We held a brain storming session in December 1994 for two days and nights with these friends. Then we took a trial run starting in a school in Chakan near Pune, a school that had just then received award in the national science fair. Jayant Phalke, who had advised us not to bring any kits from USA drove from Nasik with a bunch of equipment and thus we started our day one. There were six of us in our team. We were new at the job and spent one whole day in unpacking and arranging equipments on the table. Now we do the job in 15 minutes. For next two days we were busy showing and demonstrating various experiments in Physics, Chemistry and Biology to VIII, IX and X grade students. Students and teachers alike appreciated our activity. After that, we continued for next 8-10 days in different schools on trial basis. We got overwhelming response everywhere. So we decided to build our own MSL on a

Tata 609 chassis. We knew exactly what our needs were. We designed this 'Caravan' to carry 8 to 10 instructors, TV, VCR, sink, water tank and a generator. We also built a small bathroom useful mostly for long distance stays in remote villages. Workmen at the Standard Auto body builders did a fantastic job of workmanship and they handed in new vehicle in only two months as was promised by them. The MSL was inaugurated by noted social activist Shabana Azmi and Javed Akhtar. We visited first school in our MSL at Vadki. We were so excited! We thought all the people on the street were looking at our unusual bus. When they found out what we were upto, more than the body of the bus, they liked the idea and the spirit behind what we were doing. Sushama Kelkar wrote an article on Vidnyanvahini's concept in "Maharashtra Times" which gave us good publicity and generated a few good volunteers. Now we have about 24 volunteers and the number keeps increasing. These volunteers come from different fields like engineers, teachers, scientists and researchers. We were lucky to get such a good group of volunteers who excelled in their fields and loved teaching. We named our group 'Dialogue and Action Group' because we not only discuss our plans but we act on it also. Our DAG is a very well knit group. We have just completed 10 years of work together and we consider this as the success of DAG. Well-known toy-maker, storyteller-scientist Arvind Gupta calls the Vidnyanvahini model difficult to replicate because it is an extremely cost effective "trim and lean" model.

One may wonder how we evaluate our program. I can only say that evaluation is somewhat difficult in the type of work we do. But frequent demands from schools for Vidnyanvahini's visits, students' and teachers' oral and written compliments, and our "pre and post test" system all point to a very positive feedback. We are not creating research scientists nor making any technological contributions. That is not our vision either. There are competent universities and research centers that do it. We do not aim for a vertical growth creating islands of excellence. We are looking for a horizontal growth: to reach those who have been left behind in the process of development, to show them what science is, how one can learn by doing experiments, how to enjoy the subject, how to discard superstitions through scientific thinking and experiments. A vast group of neglected students does not get to see simple things like test tubes, flasks, beakers, magnets or lenses. We give them a chance to perform experiments with these aids. They are able to experience hands on activity, observe demonstrations, watch science videos and CDs, listen to lectures on hygiene, sex education etc. While doing all of these we try to evolve and nurture in them scientific thinking and outlook which is needed in any field in the world today. We also provide book Libraries, which benefits 5 or 6 schools at a time. We arrange students' and teachers' workshops. When Dr. Manohar Dixit, a trustee of Vidnyanvahini, presented an outline of our work at the Kolkata World Science Congress, professor Schiel of Sao Paulo University, Brazil remarked that the MSL of Vidnyanvahini works in the spirit of Tolstoy, not of Napoleon.

We have not initiated MSLs elsewhere, but we have been instrumental in either supporting partially with finances or inspiring to start this movement on their own in Karntakan, Andhra Pradesh, Tamilnadu and Gujrat. We are proud of helping Ashok Rupner's village Surodi in their watershed development program with the help of local support group. We gave this project some technical support and procured some financial help. Surodi had to face drought for 3 years and had to depend upon tanker for drinking water. But after building 12-13 *nala* bunds and somewhat favourable rain, they have seen good results. This year they won't need water tankers.

Our future plan is to start a Science Center in Anadur in Osmanabad district, which is a relatively small town on Mumbai-Hyderabad highway easily accessible to 40-50 schools by ST bus. Our goal is to build labs in Physics, Chemistry and Biology for middle and high secondary students along with a Science park with exhibits, fun activities and a media center. Access to web-based information for farmers, a computer center, and an auditorium are planned. We are doing this in association with Halo Medical Foundation, an NGO from the same area doing

marvelous work in training bare foot doctors who provide preliminary medical help to rural people.

Every year we hold annual meeting for 2 days to take stock and to plan new activities. Even though we have many retired people in our group from various fields their enthusiasm in learning new things is admirable. We hope to take our lantern of Vidnyan to reach as many young minds as possible for as long as we can.

Pushpa Deshpande

RE-EXAMINE BELIEF IN ASTROLOGY

Describing astrology as urban superstition, noted astrophysicist Jayant Narlikar expressed concern over the growing number of young people being influenced by it. Narlikar was speaking in the context of creating a society with scientific temper, at a public interview on his latest book *Scientific Edge*.

Belief in astrology should be re-examined; said Narlikar "It is not just older generation. It is worrying to see that more young people have belief in astrology today. I suggest every person examine it individually and come to a rational decision about it." he said.

In what was an engaging one-hour interview by friend and director of IUCAA Narendra Dadhich, Narlikar responded to questions on his book, which details the highs and low of growth of science in India during the millennium.

Speaking of the need for a change in social mindset for the development of a scientific temper in India, Narlikar highlighted the role of reformer Raja Ram Mohan Roy, one of the personalities whose contribution to science has been recognized in the book. Raja Ram Mohan Roy is remembered for his role in abolishing sati. He was social reformer who promoted modern scientific education and understood that progress can only come by changing mindset.

Responding to questions on science and religion, which form the concluding chapter of the book, Narlikar emphasized that the two were separate spheres and that one should not trespass other. While religion, said Narlikar, must accommodate scientific facts, science must accept that it cannot explain everything. Creation of Universe, for instance, is still unexplained. "This is a big challenge. Science for its part, must learn humility" said Narlikar.

Courtesy: Times of India

IMPRESSIONS OF A PAKISTANI PROFESSOR

Dear Friends,

A full four weeks ago I began my UNESCO 2003 Kalinga Prize visit to India. Although delayed, improved Pakistan-India relations eventually made this possible. It has been a relentless schedule from day one, with 2,3,4 lectures every day at schools, colleges, universities, research institutions, and NGOs. This trip has taken me all around India: Delhi, Pune, Mumbai, Bangalore, Chennai, Hyderabad, Bhubhaneswar, Cuttack, Calcutta, and finally back here in Delhi again. This has been an extraordinary visit. I interacted with children from excellent schools as well as those from pretty ordinary ones; had long sessions with students and teachers from colleges and universities; met with the "junta" (cooks, taxi drivers, and *rikshawallas*); and was invited to see ministers and chief ministers in several states, as well as the president of India. This extended tour of the so-called "enemy country" has been an enormous learning experience for me. I am not aware of any Indian who has made a similar kind of journey to academic institutions in Pakistan.

The events of the last four weeks could really fill a book. Let me instead quickly record a few of

my observations and experiences that you might find interesting.

Many Indian universities have a cosmopolitan character. Their social culture is modern and similar to that in universities located in free societies across the world. (In Pakistan, AKU and LUMS would be the closest approximations.) Male and female students freely intermingle, library and laboratory facilities are good, seminars and colloquia are frequent, and the faculty is intensively engaged in research. Entrance exams are tough and competition for grades is intense. The research institutes I visited (TIFR, IISC, the IIT's, IMSc, IICT, IUCAA, JNCASR, Raman Institute, Swaminathan Institute,.....) are world class.

The rural-urban divide in India is strong. Schools and colleges in small towns have a culture steeped in religion. Here one sees hierarchy, obedience, and even servility. The national anthem is sung in schools and religious symbols are given much prominence. Some students I met were bright, but many appeared rather dull. Although most Indian colleges are coeducational (unlike in Pakistan where only some are), male and female students sit separately and are not encouraged to intermingle. It is sometimes difficult to understand the English spoken there.

Where possible, I spoke in Hindi/Urdu. This enhanced my ability to communicate and also created a special kind of bonding. There is an evident desire to improve, however, and at least some college principals go out of their way to organize events and invite guest speakers. My lecture at the Basavanagudi National College, a fairly ordinary college, was the 1978th lecture over a period of 30 years!

Independent thought in India's better universities is alive and well. Office bearers of the Jawaharlal Nehru University students union in Delhi were requested by the university's administration to present flowers to President Abdul Kalam at the annual convocation. They flatly refused, saying that he is a nuclear hawk and an appointee of a fundamentalist party. Moreover, as young women of dignity they could not agree to act as mere flower girls presenting bouquets to a man. Eventually the head of the physics department, also a woman, somewhat reluctantly presented flowers to Dr. Kalam but said that she was doing so as a scientist honoring another scientist, not because she was a woman. Bravo! I have not seen comparable boldness and intellectual courage in Pakistani students. Student unions in Pakistan have been banned for two decades and so it is a moot question if any union there could have mustered similar independence of thought.

Taking science to the masses has become a kind of mantra all over India. My columnist friend Praful Bidwai - a powerful critic of the Indian state and its militaristic policies - counts among India's greatest achievements the energisation of its democracy and refers to "our social movements, with their rich traditions of people's self-organisation, innovative protest and daring questioning of power". These movements have ensured that, unlike in Pakistan, land grabbers in Indian cities have found fierce resistance when they try to gobble up public spaces - parks, zoos, playgrounds, historical sites, etc. Praful should also include in his list the huge number of science popularization movements, sometimes supported by the state but often spontaneous. These are sweeping through India's towns and villages, seeking to bring about an understanding of natural phenomena, teach simple health care, and introduce technology appropriate to a rural environment. There is not even one comparable Pakistani counterpart. I watched some science communicators, such as Arvind Gupta at IUCAA in Pune, whose infectious enthusiasm leaves children thrilled and desirous of pursuing careers in science. Individual Indian states have funded and created numerous impressive planetariums and science museums, and local organizations are putting out a huge volume of written and audio-visual science materials in the local languages.

Attitudes of Indian scientists towards science are conservative. Progress through science is an immensely popular notion in India, stressed both by past and present leaders. But what is science understood to be? I was a little jolted upon reading Nehru's words, written in stone at the entrance to the Jawaharlal Nehru Institute for Advanced Research in Bangalore: "I too have

worshipped at the shrine of science". The notion of "worship" and "shrine of science" do not go well with the modern science and the scientific temper. Science is about challenging - not worshipping. But science in India is largely seen as an instrument that enhances productive capabilities, and not as a transformational tool for producing an informed, rational society. Most Indian scientists are techno-nationalists - they put their science at the service of the state rather than the people. In this respect, Pakistan is no different.

India's nuclear and space programs are nationally venerated as symbols of high achievement. This led to India's nuclear hero, Dr. Abdul Kalam, becoming the country's president. When Dr. Kalam received me in his office, after the usual pleasantries, I expressed my regret at India having gone nuclear and causing Pakistan to follow suit. Shouldn't India now reduce dangers by initiating a process of nuclear disarmament? Dr. Kalam gave me a well-practiced response: India would get rid of its nuclear weapons the very minute that America agreed to do the same. He displayed little enthusiasm for an agreement to cut off fissile material production. However, he did agree to my suggestion that exchange of academics could be an important way to build good relations between Pakistan and India.

Indian society remains deeply superstitious, caste divisions are important, and women still have a long way to go. While I found myself admiring the energetic popular science movements, I was disappointed that they pay relatively little attention to anti-scientific superstitions that pervade Indian society. The *Jyotishi* (astrologer) dictates the dates when a marriage is possible, and even whether a couple can marry at all. After I gave a strong pitch for fighting superstition, a young woman asked me what to do if "*koi devi aap pe utar jaye*" (if a spirit should descend upon you). Inter-caste marriages are still frowned upon, and usually forbidden. In local newspapers one typically reads of tragic accounts such as that of a boy and girl from different castes who commit suicide together after their families forbid the match. Although Indian women are freer, more visible, and more confident than their Pakistani counterparts, India is still a strongly male dominated society. However, the rapidly increasing number of well-educated young women gives hope for the future.

Muslims in India remain at the margins of scientific research and higher education. Hamdard University in Delhi is distinctly better than the university bearing the same name on the Pakistani side. Jamia Millia, a largely Muslim university, appears to be doing well and a bit better than any Pakistani university in the field of physics. But, although Muslims form 12% of India's population, I met only a few Muslim scientists in leading Indian research institutes and universities. Discrimination against Muslims does not appear to be the dominant cause. A professor at Jamia Millia told me that an overwhelming number of Muslim students were inclined towards seeking easier (and more lucrative) professions in spite of special incentives offered to them at his university. In general, Muslims in India appear more modern and secular than in Pakistan. However, Hyderabad surprised me. In the lecture that I gave at a government women's college, there was only one young woman without a *burqa* in an audience of about a hundred. The women there were astonished to learn that Pakistan is, at least in most places, more liberal than Hyderabad. The extreme conservatism in the Muslim part of Hyderabad city reminds one of Peshawar.

There was a remarkable lack of hostility towards Pakistan. Indeed a desire for friendly relations was repeatedly expressed in every forum I went to. This is not to be taken lightly: many of my public lectures were either about (or on) science, but others dealt with deeply contentious issues - nuclear weapons, India-Pakistan relations, and the Kashmir conflict. Various Indian peace groups and NGOs organized public discussions and screenings of the two documentaries that I had made (with Zia Mian): "Pakistan and India under the Nuclear Shadow", and "Crossing the Lines - Kashmir, Pakistan, India". To be sure, my views on Indian policies and actions in Kashmir occasionally provoked knee-jerk nationalistic responses, but these were infrequent and exchanges always remained within the bounds of civility.

Ignorance about Pakistan is widespread. In most public gatherings, and certainly in every

school that I spoke at, people had never seen a Pakistani. Many Indians have a misconception of Pakistan as a medieval, theocratic state. In fact, only some parts of Pakistan can be so characterized. Many Indians think that Pakistanis have been totally muzzled and live in a police state. This is also untrue - articles in the Pakistani press are often blunter and more critical than in the Indian press. An Indian friend hypothesized that knowledge of the other country is inversely proportional to the geographical distance between countries. Unfortunately this will remain true unless there is a substantial exchange of visitors between the two countries.

Indians are deeply nationalistic and may dislike particular governments but they only rarely criticize the Indian state. This is easy to understand: the democratic process has given a strong sense of participation to most citizens and successfully forged an Indian national identity (except in Kashmir, and parts of the North East) that transcends the immense diversity of cultures across the country. But this has an important downside: nationalism is easy to mobilize and highly dangerous in matters of war and conflict. I found the smugness of the Indian elite (especially the heads of nuclear, space, and technology programs) to be rather irritating. Even if India has done well in some respects, in most others it is still behind the rest of the world. Fortunately, Pakistani intellectuals are less attached to their state and therefore more forthright. The reason is rather clear: three decades of military rule have dealt a serious blow to nation building and firming up the Pakistani identity.

Similarities between the two countries exceed the differences. Cities in both countries are poisoned with thick car fumes (Delhi is the exception) and grid-locks are frequent; mega slums and exploding populations threaten to swallow up the countryside; electricity supplies are intermittent; and water is fast disappearing from rivers and aquifers. The rural poor are fleeing to the cities, and wretched beggars with amputated limbs are casually accepted as part of the urban scenery. The absence of long-term planning is manifest. Obsessive militarization and reckless spending on defense shows no sign of abating in either country.

As I head back home to Islamabad, I want to thank the many friends and organizations in India who made elaborate logistical travel and accommodation arrangements for my wife Hajra and myself. Others arranged my talks and public meetings, sometimes on subjects normally considered as deeply controversial and divisive. They worked hard to make each event a success. This letter is also addressed to those who I met for the first time but who I would like to keep in contact with. It would take much too long to write to scores of people individually, and so I ask for forgiveness in sending this one letter to all.

With best regards,

Pervez Hoodbhoy

STATE REELS UNDER A SPATE OF RITUALS

If the above four events spreads over past fortnight are anything to go by, it looks like the progressive elements in Maharashtra are indeed lying low. On Jan 23, 2005, the self righteous brigade of Sahitya Sammelan organizers, led by none other than newly elected erudite Dalit President Keshav Meshram, did what was unprecedented in the history of the annual literary jamboree – a goat sacrifice. Meshram, though not directly involved in the sacrifice, gave the act his complete support. A faction of litterateurs, rationalists like actor Shriram Lagoo and organizations like ANS decried the act, but the organizers stood their ground. Meshram even went to the extent justifying in the name of tradition. Incidentally cash-trapped State Government spent over Rs 25 lakh on the meet that had an overall cost of over Rs one crore.

A few days after the gruesome Mandharadevi stampede, it was bureaucracy's turn to 'follow tradition.' Wearing *sowala* (the sacred loin cloth) Pune's Divisional Commissioner Prabhakar

Karandikar performed a *shant puja* at the Mandharadevi temple. "I had done the yadna in my individual capacity not as the divisional commissioner." Karandikar told the news people.

Complaints have been made against PWD EE Khedekar, who along with his followers launched a self-styled religion called Shivadharma at Sindkhed Raja in Buldhana district, on Jan 12. Khedekar, whose Shivadharma's declared aim is to 'cleanse the society' of Brahmins (bhatmukta, bhayamukta), is accused of using his official place for 'religious' activities, but the government has preferred to keep mum. The Sambhaji Brigade supreme commands a considerable sway over a politically influential caste.

And now the latest: On Monday, State Forest Minister Babanrao Pachpute invited Bhaiyyuji Maharaj, a guru from Indore with a large following among the State's political who's who (from all parties), to open his camp office at Nagpur. Unlike his predecessors, Pachpute has, commendably, decided to spend a day at Nagpur's Forest Department headquarters along with his Additional Chief Secretary Ashok Khot for quick disposal of files. Earlier in the day, Bhaiyyuji Maharaj addressed a motley crowd of forest employees. This gathering had everyone in attendance: all three principal chief conservators of forest to the lowest-rung forest guards, giving them a liberal dose of spiritual guidance – *ashirvachan*, as the official press note called it. Many officials raised their eyebrows in private. "Since the past few months, the department is being run more by political workers than by employees of forest department. And this one is the crowning, or should we call it clowning, glory" said an official, requesting anonymity.

Courtesy: *Indian Express*

OIL - WATER BABA

Sometimes I wonder how the events take their turn, which, is stranger than fiction in this Marathwada region of Maharashtra. Take for example, the case of Oil – Water Baba from Umaraga. The name itself makes one to pause and wonder what this can be. Just within a period of 2-3 months, the chronic patients from neighbourhood areas like Umaraga, Murum, Kadeva Nimbala, Kaal Nimbala, Aurangabad, Beed etc started pouring in Koliwada, a suburban shanty place in Umaraga town on every Wednesday. People from nearby Karnataka border also started camping in this town after reading an advertisement that appeared in local newspaper about a Christian holy person, Oil – Water Baba, who can cure all the diseases in this world by just using oil and water mixture. This Baba started claiming in public that he is incarnation of Jesus Christ, who has miraculous curing power for any diseases like cancer, paralysis, asthma, tuberculosis, epilepsy, addiction etc., or any diseases you name it. Just apply the oil water mixture to the affected parts; eyes, ears, nose or any other part of the body. This mixture would force the Satan causing the disease, out instantly; if it is very powerful one has to come more than once to achieve the desired result.

Baba's Centre at Koliwada started attracting crowds, which grew from just 10 to 2000 within a short period. Most of them were from poor communities of Muslims, Dalits, and tribal. Since the patients are possessed of Satan, Baba found it appropriate to beat them with shoes and sticks mercilessly and causing body injuries. Some of them even went to police station to complain about this atrocity. Baba used to behave in a funny and cruel manner; dancing jumping shouting, pulling the women by their hair, dragging the children, etc. The crowd was mesmerized by such behaviour and thought that this was the only way of God to unburden the curse of disease. The visitors were supposed to bring coconuts, flowers, candles and bottles of oil water mixture from a few designated shops run by Baba's cronies and relatives. This would cost them at least Rs 50 for the goods worth of 15-20 Rs. Nearby shops started selling photo-frames of Jesus Christ at exorbitant cost of Rs 50-60 which would normally cost not more than 15-20 Rs. Thus everyone concerned started making a quick buck in a shortest period. The prayers sung by Baba were funny and meaningless, which might not have ever been heard in the Christian world.

After the prayer 4-5 empty bags were circulated to accept silent donation. Thus Baba was making at least a few thousands at every occasion.

When we started investigating about Baba we came to know that his real name was Kantu Mahadev Gaikwad who was earning his meager livelihood by working as a mason. One day he suddenly realized that he is incarnation of Jesus Christ with healing power to cure all the known and unknown diseases just by sprinkling a mixture of oil and water.

We, all the activists of ANS, gave wide publicity on the exploits of this fraudulent person. Even we managed to take video of all the events during the prayer session. We challenged Baba to prove his miraculous power in public. We showed the video film to select gathering of eminent personalities of Umaraga. We lodged a police complaint against this deceitful person and requested to arrest him under objectionable advertisement and false remedy act. We also emphasized that this fellow and his followers are spreading religious terrorism in and around this area. His cronies were terrorizing ANS activists too.

All the local newspapers gave a wide publicity, and people were made aware of the fake miracles of Jesus Christ. Based on our complaint police arrested him but were forced to release him on bail. Despite our continuous efforts Babas like him keep surfacing somewhere, sometime. In fact the example of Oil – Water Baba is a tip of the iceberg. There may be hundreds of them operating locally without much publicity. A continuous vigilance by all concerned is the only answer to this social evil.

Prof. Kiran Sagar

DR. H.NARASIMHAIAH: AN UNCONVENTIONAL HUMAN (1920-2005)

Dr H Narasimhaiah, freedom fighter, eminent educationist and rationalist died at a nursing home at Bangalore on 31 January after a prolonged illness. The 84-year-old Gandhian was former vice-chancellor of Bangalore University, former president of Indian Rationalist Association and the founder of Bangalore Science Forum. He was the only Indian Fellow of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP International) set up by Prof. Paul Kurtz in the USA.

Narasimhaiah's body was kept for public viewing at the National High School, where thousands of people from different walks of life paid their last respect. Among them were the Chief Minister of Karnataka, N.Dharam Singh, the ministers M.Mallikarjun Kharge, P.G.R.Shindia, and R.Ramalinga Reddy, the former Prime Minister H.D.Deve Gowda, the former Chief Minister M.Veerappa Moily, the Union Minister of state for planning M.V.Rajasekharan, the space scientist U.R.Rao and several students of National school and college. His body was cremated with full state honors at his native village Hosur near Gauribidanur in Kolar district. The cremation took place in accordance with HN's will. (He had constituted a committee for conducting his last rites and had set aside Rs. 2000 for it).

HN was elected the president of Indian Rationalist Association during the 12th National Conference held at New Delhi in 1983. HN served the office of the President of Indian Rationalist Association till 1985 when M.V.Ramamurthy was elected the president. While working as the vice-chancellor of Bangalore University, he initiated to form an academic committee to inquire into the so-called "miracles" of the godmen. The investigating team exposed the godman Prem Baba red handed while performing a hand trick to "produce" holy ash from thin air. The team also exposed Satya Sai Baba by publicizing his refusal to face the enquiry commission, as it wanted to verify his "miracles".

Dr. Narasimhaiah, born in 1920, had a humble background. He joined the National High School in 1935, reaching the school by walking 85 kilometers by foot in two days. He obtained MSc (Physics) degree with first class, and PhD in Nuclear Physics from Ohio State University (USA)

in the year 1946. The same year HN started his academic career as a lecturer. During 1961-72 he worked as a college principal. While he was the vice-chancellor of Bangalore University, several new departments were introduced in the university, which includes social work, psychology, mass communication, dance, drama, music and vocational courses. He also served as a nominated member of Karnataka State Legislative Assembly, and president of National Education Society of Bangalore. HN received Padma Bhushan award of national recognition in the year 1984 while serving as the president of Indian Rationalist Association.

Rationalist

Dr. Narasimhaiah was known for his quick wit. On one occasion when he was sick, he asked the college authorities to send two boys to help him. On seeing four eager boys at his door instead of two, he is said to have remarked, "I didn't ask for my pall bearers, you know". HN above all was a communicator, and it was with children that he was best. Although he had left strict instructions that on no account should holiday be declared when he died, students and teachers from National School and College poured out of their classrooms on hearing of his death to have a last glimpse of the man who taught them to ask the question "Why".

Courtesy: Frontline

HOMEOPATHY: SCIENCE OR PSEUDO SCIENCE?

According to a press report, the medical association in France has proposed to the government not to patronize teaching and practice of this therapy, as it is not scientific. This is a bold decision and is in the right direction. In India also the government should not promote its education and practice. Since a German physician Samuel Heinemann, the founder of this therapy developed the medical system, the scientists have raised questions about its scientific base. If you refer to Peer's Medical Encyclopedia or any other encyclopedias you will find that Homeopathy is not a scientific therapy.

The reason for not recognizing it as a scientific system is that its remedies do not contain any medicinal elements in substantial proportion to be effective to cure any diseases. The remedies of homeopathy retain only miniscule ingredients of the medicinal elements of herbs, minerals, salts, etc. Its pills contain one part of medicinal element against hundred, ten thousand, hundred thousand or even more parts of diluting ingredient such as lactose. The scientists ask the homeopaths as to how its remedies containing almost all the ingredients of glucose and only a trace of any medical element can be effective in curing a disease? They have no scientific explanation to this quite logical question. The homeopaths say that divine rays energize their medicines during the diluting process! This is not a convincing explanation for a scientific therapy. Once you bring any idea of divine energy to medical system, its scientific foundation collapses like a house of cards. It becomes a faith healing system. This is why all its medicines are dubbed as placebo.

In press media, very tall claims are made that homeopathy can cure any disease you name. As a matter of fact, it has no cure for deadly diseases caused by micro-germs such as tuberculosis, typhoid, etc., or other diseases like diabetes, high blood pressure and several others. Even for minor ailments it has no cure as its medicines do not contain any medicinal elements. But it creates an illusion that it cures diseases because the immune system cures many diseases. Some diseases can be cured without medical treatment by a change in life style, dieting, balanced food, exercise, reducing weight, abstaining from alcohols, smoking, drugs and living stress free life. But credit is given to homeopathic treatments.

Some allopathic medicines have side effects and its treatment is expensive. To make homeopathy acceptable to the general public, the proponents of the system claim that its

remedies have no side effects and are cheaper. Both the claims are half-truth. It is true that its medicines have no side effect. But how can a medicine without any medicinal ingredients and containing only glucose create side effects? It has neither side effects nor direct effect to cure any disease. It is a no gain no loss medical system. Its cheapness is illusory. As normally, the homeopathic treatment takes longer period to cure, the expenditure is in small installments for a longer period, while in allopathic treatment you have to pay for the treatment in lump- sum or in a very short period.

In allopathy, Ayurveda and Naturopathy there is no sure cure for some chronic diseases such as migraine, backache, arthritis, etc. Those who suffer from such diseases opt for homeopathy or any other alternative quack medicine. Those who are eligible for allopathic colleges but do not get admission and those who are not eligible for admission or cannot afford to bear high cost for the faculty opt for homeopathy. The homeopathic practitioners know that some allopathic medicines are more effective than homeopathic medicines. They prescribe allopathic medicines also to their clients! When the Supreme Court prohibited homeopaths to prescribe allopathic medicines, they protested against that verdict!

Dr Prasant Banerji, a well-known Homeopath practicing in Kolkata, in his interview published in *Times of India* (dated 11 Sept 2004) has claimed that diluted medicines are working without doubt and have dared to boast that he has cured ten different cases of cancer and has submitted these cases for verification. Dr Banerji is not the first physician to boast to have cured cancers. Some naturopaths, acupuncturists even urine therapists have made such claims in the past and none have proved it beyond any doubt. Will Dr Banerji be able to prove it scientifically?

Laxmidas Khatau

TELE-EVANGELIST BENNY HINN IN THE INDIAN SUPERSTITION MARKET!

US tele-evangelist Benny Hinn is in India these days. The billionaire, who claims to be the Christian god's true representative, has spent millions of Dollars for organising a three-day grand evangelical fiesta at Bangalore's Jakkur airport, the *Festival of Blessings*. In front of an audience of several thousand people, among them political leaders and film stars, the star faith healer is demonstrating his "divine healing powers". He has announced that he will cure all patients coming to him, whatever their disease.

Radical Hindu organizations are up in arms, sensing that his show is aiming at mass conversions of their Hindu sheep to Christianity. In Bangalore, where they are quite vocal, they raised strong and even violent opposition against the program. They burnt cars, destroyed public vehicles, stopped a few special buses that were hired to bring in thousands of people from the villages and forced the travelers to quit. This violent and uncivilized opposition was, in fact, the best that could happen to Benny Hinn. It diverted public attention away from the real danger of his campaign. The media is in a fix whether to report the alarming event or to keep mum. Few want to support him, and criticizing him looks suddenly like joining the camp of the Hindu extremists. Except in the local press, there were so far only some small reports - much to the benefit of the dangerous "healer".

To make it a super show that would demonstrate strength and impress critics as well as supporters - and especially his donors in the USA, Benny Hinn drummed up an enormous audience of several thousand people (official claim is 3 million people!). His little secret: he paid daily wages and provided free food and conveyance to a lot of them. The hired audience was brought to the venue in hundreds of special buses - a practice that has earlier been popular with political parties. A glossy advertising campaign for several millions of Dollars did the rest. Hinn also invited an array of special guests and celebrities from the fields of religion, politics and

showbiz. At least the last category was generously paid for their appearance at the "Benny Hinn Concert". What kind of benefit the others are expecting time alone will reveal, if they are watched closely. Among the celebrities, who agreed to participate in the event, were former prime minister H T Deve Gowda, Karnataka chief minister N Dharam Singh, Kerala chief minister Oommen Chandi, central cabinet ministers Arjun Singh, Oscar Fernandes and M V Rajashekar, Rajya Sabha (Upper House) deputy chairman K Rahman Khan, Singer Jagjit Singh, actor Johny Liver, V J Benedict, Anil Kant - to name just a few of the whole galaxy.

The official slogan of the event was "Healing through Christ". In India, illiteracy is not limited to the field of letters. The widespread illiteracy is the lack of basic knowledge in science and healthcare, which could be called scientific illiteracy. When ignorance about body functions and diseases combines with limited modern medical facilities and great poverty makes hospitalization and special medicines unaffordable; many find hope in miraculous solutions. Using poverty, fear, ignorance and gullibility in such situations to discredit the modern medical system and to propagate that ailments can be cured by Jesus' blessings, is a cruel, anti-social, immoral and dangerous act.

The idea, that ailments could be cured not by medical but by divine interference, though, is not a specialty of faith healing Christian missionaries. There are numerous stories in the campaign matter of Sai Baba, Amrithanandamayii and other Hindu godmen and godwomen claiming that the sufferers will find solutions to their health problems through prayers, offerings and rituals. The Hindu leaders, who are protecting, propagating and promoting such superstitions and using them politically, cannot neither criticize the faith healing missionaries nor refute their claims. Their attacks on evangelists like Benny Hinn focus the whole attention only on the conversion aspect, for they compete with the missionaries on the superstition market.

There are several examples illustrating Benny Hinn's divine healing powers: One of his elderly followers was turned away from the entrance of ARGO stadium in Sacramento, USA, because she had not paid enough money to be allowed to enter. Later on, she was "slain in the spirit" on the stage. While she was lying on the floor, a huge man, likewise "slain", landed on top of her breaking her leg. In 1993 in Basel (Switzerland) Hinn prophesied about a man with cancer that he had many years to live - he died two days later. In Nairobi, Kenya, in early March 2000, four patients released from a hospital to attend Hinn's "miracle crusade" died while waiting for prayers.

At Bangalore, the pastors and agents who bring audience to the show were offered commission on the basis of head count. Also the audience was lured with the invitation to a free grand feast. At the venue, there have been 400 huge food outlets working 24 hours to provide free food. Money seems to be no concern for Benny Hinn. But from where does it come? It is reported that his World Outreach Church has an income of at least 100 million Dollars per year, which allows Hinn to maintain a 3.5 million-Dollar home and to travel when and wherever he wants, staying in luxury hotels with bills up to 2,000 Dollars per night. The jet set evangelist knows how to market his shows effectively. His own TV channel is a major instrument of his business. Sowing the seeds of his special "education" for the poor in Asia, Africa and South America seems to reap in rich harvest.

Benny Hinn's dark empire is flourishing. His message to the poor that they should not go to hospitals with their ailments, but simply rely on Benny Hinn & Jesus Christ, is selling well. But it is sabotaging the result of the longtime effort of India's health care campaigns and tries to herd the people away from health literacy to ignorance and darkness. It is the duty of the political leaders to lift up the poor and uneducated from their poverty and enable them to afford the fruits of science and modern medicine. All activities of those who are unscrupulously driving a major part of the population deeper into darkness and into a self-destructive approach to effective health ought to be stopped, not only in India, but all over Asia, Africa and Latin America. The governments of the third world have to open their eyes and see the alarming influence of missionaries like Benny Hinn.

Benny Hinn is a dangerous man. And those who support him in his inhuman efforts, in whatever positions and offices they may be, deserve our condemnation and contempt.

Courtesy: *Rationalist*

I AM, TASLEEMA NASRIN

Most people equate spirituality with some form of religious belief. However much they might want to separate the two, a hint of religion always manages to show up in spirituality. It is for this reason that the word means nothing to me. I have no connection with any religion, any God, any sect. I only believe in secular humanism.

I was very young when I began to argue and agitate for equal rights for women. Even as a girl, I could never understand why there were different rules for the boys and a distinct set of norms for us girls. I think it was my ability to question that made me special. I never got reply that quite satisfied me. And my quest just continued....

If I can do something for those who are oppressed and exploited, if I can help improve their lot, if I can create a consciousness among women, I would say that I have found contentment. I would still not call it peace – I'm never at peace – but I would say a significant milestone has been achieved. I'm not a very courageous person. My strength comes when I see women struggling. Their struggle gives me the resilience to keep fighting for their rights.

My approach to all predicaments is the same – get to the root of it and eradicate it forever. There's no use finding superficial solution to perennial problems. I am a woman of science. I believe that a scientific temper is the best way to sort out a complication. Blind faith is not my cup of tea. I do not believe in bowing my head before anyone and anything.

Courtesy: *Times of India*

A CASE OF ILLEGITIMATE CHILD

A child born of illegitimate relationship between a high caste man and scheduled caste woman would be categorized to be a person under higher caste, the Supreme court ruled upholding the view of the High Court of Andhra Pradesh. Not only the people of the community, even the courts recognized that child Shobha was born to Murari Rao, a forward community person and Sinhachalem who belonged to Scheduled caste community, though they were married unofficially.

Normally if a married woman later gets divorced for some reason or other, I understand the child is normally left in the custody of the mother whose caste she is assigned till she becomes a major. Then she could take her own decision. Here unfortunately the parents were not married officially. Is it correct to penalize the child for the fault of her parents? I feel she should be considered belonging to scheduled caste and wish that the Human Rights Commission comes to help her.

Dr. K Natarajan

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THOUGHT & ACTION

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KNOWLEDGE SYSTEM

Though all religions took their shape long ago, they have gone on formulating themselves. Spiritual belief and knowledge were first separated with the emergence of Buddhism as a religion. Buddhism transformed its belief system into knowledge before Socrates formulated his "Knowledge is virtue". By the time Buddha institutionalized the knowledge-centered *Sanghas*, the belief system had become strongly rooted in superstition. The knowledge system, on the other hand tried to free human from such belief-centered superstitions and reformed the human consciousness so that human mind could raise rational questions in both material and spiritual realms.

Kanchan Illaih



In This Issue

02

WHY SUPERSTITION?

Peter Lorie

08

KUNDALINI

Puran Bair

12

INCULCATING SECULARISM

Deepak Girme

17

**DISCUSSIONS ON
ANTI-SUPERSTITION**

24

VIVEKVAHINI'S JOURNEY

Narendra Dabholkar

27

IS AYURVEDA OUTDATED?

Dr. Chandrakant S. Wagale

WHY SUPERSTITION?

Every age pays attention to the ancient superstitions according to a certain subtle fashion, very often knowing nothing about the original lore or sources from which they derived. It wasn't so long ago that bibles were fanned in front of sick men's faces and communion wine was prescribed for whooping cough while women bathed their sore eyes with baptismal water. Although modern westerners would not admit crossing themselves when faced with potential evil such as a passing magpie, they do cross fingers to prevent bad luck. Some superstitions merely transform from the original, and the original is frequently a relic of still more ancient cultures and long vanished ways of life. Above all, superstitions remain as outward expressions of the tensions and anxieties that hold sway over humanity as it struggles down the corridor of life from birth to death, buffeted by change and uncertainty.

We can see the superstition, therefore, as a constancy; a kind of reassurance against fluctuation as though we are part of an impenetrable mystery with incomprehensible rule. To Christians the original "pagan" beliefs were superstitions while to the Protestants the use of rosaries was a superstition, and to the Puritans the decorations carefully displayed in any cozy house during Christmas were superstitions, especially the use of ivy or mistletoe or holly.

And yet - strangely perhaps in this age of reason - it very often turns out that we are more interested in the mysteries of superstitions than in previous centuries when they were taken for granted, and that in fact there is much more to many superstitions than is at first obvious. Mistletoe, for example, was the most holy of plants to the druids, why so? To hang a sprig of this strange plant in a house at Christmas is to attract young men to kiss young women beneath it, each time plucking one of the berries from the sprig. Why should this be so? Who started it? What were the properties of mistletoe that promoted fertility in women? Why did the hanging of mistletoe keep away the devil? The young woman to whom the man had given the plucked berry would retire to her room, lock the door and swallow the berry. She would then inscribe the initials of the man onto a mistletoe leaf and "stitch into her corset close to her heart, binding him to her so long it remain there".

Superstitious nonsense! But how do we maintain the best love affairs, the best and most happy relationships? By mutual concern, by bringing the partner close to an open heart, by honesty and warmth, by acknowledging their presence in our lives. How better to represent this than with a mistletoe leaf inscribed and secreted in the most intimate place?

During the years following the seventeenth century, witchcraft was seen as almost an epidemic form of superstition with all manner of terrors available to the ignorant and even the intelligent individual. Couples about to be married would be forced into the most complex rituals in order to untie any witchy influence, including and specially untying of any knots in their clothes that might contain witch's spell. There were so many significant objects that could not be accepted as gifts that the intended couple could barely set up their homes without serious danger of witchcraft; pins, shoes and knives were absolutely taboo, and if the man happened to be fisherman and one of his guests inadvertently borrowed something from his fishing boat there would be hell to pay because the luck of the fishing goes if kissed! Evil could always be turned away through the various recognized means, such as casting a pure substance over the shoulder or by turning and facing the source. There was never only one way to go.

All superstition has grown from something; there is no smoke without fire. Who was the first one to decide that opening an umbrella in a house is bad luck? Who was the first to walk under a ladder and suffer the consequences? Who hung the horseshoe the wrong

way up, smashed a mirror, and spilled salt to spend a life-sentence at the hands of the fates? Who first branded Friday the thirteenth as a day on which the luck would run out? What was the world like that produced and maintained such extraordinary ideas?

The bulk of the population, aside perhaps from the aristocratic classes was concerned largely with the search for or production of food; therefore the changes of the seasons, the success or failure of the crops and all the influences that nature had upon life. The greater part of the populations of Europe lived in rural areas in small isolated communities. The difference between rich and poor was marked, and 99 percent of the people were poor. Even as late as seventeenth century England around two – thirds of the adult male population were unable to read and would sign their name with an “X”.

Life was extremely hazardous, and the central feature of day-to-day existence was a preoccupation with the explanation for the relief of human misfortune. If you lived in a small hovel or the base of a tree, the vagaries of the climate, your very often hostile neighbours or robbers and vagrant that passed by, were constant concern to you.

In seventeenth-century Europe, for example, life expectancy was influenced by the constant presence of sickness and premature death. The average life expectancy at birth of boys borne in the last part of that century was just 30 years. Today it is around 70 years. One-third of the children within the aristocracy died before the age of five.

Food supply, of course, was totally reliant on the success of harvests in the local areas. Each family went either to the local farms and bartered goods for food direct from the land, grew it themselves, or at best went to local village markets. If an epidemic of bubonic plague happened to coincide with a poor harvest, the population could suffer as much as a 50 percent loss in one year! The seventeenth century plague in England, for example, killed 34 percent of people living in the London area. It is said that the greatest reason why this particular epidemic was stopped was the Great Fire of London in 1666, which literally burned the dirty and rat-infested buildings to the ground and thus ended the spread of disease. Living in these times was like jumping from the frying pan into the fire.

The main causes of the diseases were readily sent to be derived from supernatural sources, and the only form of psychotherapy was provided by the clergy. Physicians were regarded with the greatest suspicion and “avoided like the plague” they sought unsuccessfully to cure.

Helplessness in the face of the disease and suffering was perhaps the most essential element in the background to the beliefs of superstition, but not only the reason. There was also fire. “Fear candle in hay loft, in barn and in shed”.

The only form of light after the sun went down was fire, and fire killed relentlessly and often. The Great Fire of London was only one example of an uncontrollable element within ordinary lives. So many other examples of death by ‘conflagration’ existed that it seems if one survived ill health one would as readily die of accidental burning.

But the greatest single source of superstition was the magic of religion. Throughout the whole of the Western developing world, all the way from the most ancient pagan beliefs right up to the beginning of the Americas, religion and its powerful rituals gave life to superstition.

The magic of nearly all religions, from which we derive superstitions, was a form of supernatural power, which gave man the ability to control his environment. The magic was no less available in the original Christian Church. We have lost a lot of deeper magic today, but the remnants appear each time we worry about the number 13 or whether or not we should walk under a ladder.

In simple terms, people believed that prayer worked in the same way as they had originally believed that pagan charms prevented evil spirits from damaging their lives. Witches, who behaved according to the previous belief structure by using charms and

incantations, were burned at the stake once the Christians took over, but the same ideas applied. So, for saint in pre-Christian times we could read witch.

Those that would eventually become saints were in a way, specialists in the same way as doctors are today (except that sainthood was granted only after death), and as witches were in pagan Europe. The line of power can be traced in this way – witch (shaman) to saint to doctor. And out of each expert within the different systems of each era came the superstitions that we all observe today.

Peter Lorie
From his book *Superstitions*

EINSTEIN – A RATIONALIST, HUMANIST AND A THINKER

The year 2005 is declared as the World Year of Physics, to commemorate the hundred years of the miraculous year – 1905, the year when Einstein propounded many of his astoundingly path breaking theories in Physics. These theories have revolutionized the way we understand and interpret of the world around us.

Many of us wonder in what way is Einstein's discoveries related to our everyday lives. You don't have to look further than the remote control that you use to change television channels. The principle that underlines the remote control is based on what is known as the photoelectric effect. Einstein was able to interpret that when light falls on certain metals, electrons are released. The energy of the light had come in certain proportionate quantities. This quanta or particles of light were named as photons. Hence the phenomenon was named as the photoelectric effect. In the same year, Einstein also published his famous theory of relativity. But this theory was so difficult to understand and appreciate in those days that the Nobel committee that awards Nobel Prizes, cited Einstein's work on photoelectric effect and chose not to acknowledge his tremendously important and large volume of work on relativity.

Einstein was a great thinker. Unlike most scientists, he devised thought experiments (all gedanken experiments) to prove or disprove a theory. His genius lay in the fact that he looked at the world differently and turned the way we see space and time, on its head. In doing so, he opened new vistas in Physics, which until then were unthinkable. The fact of the matter is that the foundations of Einstein's theory are so deep that scientists are still grappling to interpret them even today.

Einstein was born into a middle class family in Ulm, Germany, on 14th of March 1879. He grew up in Munich but later moved to Bern, Switzerland. In 1901 he became a Swiss citizen apparently to avoid Germany's compulsory military service.

Over and above his academic work, Einstein was a very active pacifist. For him, peace required eternal struggle against warmongers and darker side of human nature. Throughout the world war years, Einstein actively participated in public debates and at one time was even persecuted by the Nazis. Einstein immigrated to the US and became a citizen there in 1940.

During and after World War I, Einstein became a household name. He became the scientific superstar. This fame gave him many opportunities to comment publicly on political matters. The war and its aftermath made him speak against militarism, fascism, forced military service and nationalism. Einstein lobbied to generate funds to support groups that were working for peace and freedom. Einstein argued that war could never be humanized; it can only abolish people and their spirits. He described the armament

industry as the evil power behind nationalism. He wrote widely on disarmament – an all or nothing strategy. He argued that as long as armies exist, political and economic conflict would lead to war.

When World War II broke out, and it appeared inevitable that the Germans were making the atom bomb, many people approached Einstein and beseeched him to change his stance on peace and justice. Alarmed at the development, Einstein wrote to the US president, Roosevelt, urging him to consider the development of the atom bomb. In 1939, partly because of Einstein's letter, a committee was formed that saw the funding and research for an atomic fission bomb. After the US strikes on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Einstein was denounced publicly. In later years, Einstein worked hard for disarmament, opposed the US plans for making the hydrogen bomb and even called the US-Soviet arms race as "hysterical".

Although Einstein was a Jew, he was not particularly religious. As he witnessed the growing anti-Semitism in Germany, he started identifying with the Jews and supported Zionism. He identified with the Jews not as a religious but as a cultural grouping with a shared history and a commitment to social justice. He supported the idea of settling Jews in Palestine though not creation of Israel. He was offered the presidency of the newly formed Jewish state of Israel in 1952, but he declined it, humbly admitting that he was not a politician and hence not capable of handling duties as the president of a nation. The Hebrew University in Jerusalem was established because of Einstein's personal efforts.

There are many lighter sides of Einstein and how he erred in interpreting the society and science in which he lived. But undoubtedly he was a genius and the most influential person of the twentieth century.

Anuradha Bhagawat

KUNDALINI

Mata Nirmaladevi claims to work on individual as well as en-mass spontaneously through her style of *Sahaj Yoga* by awakening their *Kundalini* power and raising the same to *Sahasra chakra* leading to realization of God and *Samadhi*.

The members of ANS held demonstrations at Pune and Satara and challenged her to prove her claims scientifically. Mataji claimed that she had cured thousands of patients of heart and other ailments in the country and abroad through awakening of the *Kundalini*.

It is believed that *Kundalini* – supernatural power - exists and it can be awakened through *Sahaj Yoga* technique. According to this, *Kundalini yoga* is channeling energy through the nervous system and then through spinal chord. The energy ascends through a narrow passage in the spinal column and passes through six psychic centers before it reaches its final block, the seventh center. Nirmaladevi claims that once this reaches through *Sahaj yoga*, *Kundalini* awakening technique, then one can achieve realization of God and integration of his intellect, mind and soul. He enjoys the supreme bliss of Almighty and leads a new life towards real prosperity in physical, mental and spiritual fields.

ANS challenged her claim and asked her to prove before a select committee. She did not respond to it on the pretext that she does not have time since she travels extensively within the country and abroad.

ANS put forward the following questions to her to which she did not answer:

- If the technique of *Kundalini* awakening has been verified as she claimed, then why is there no reference of *Kundalini* in any recognized medical books and journals?
- If *Kundalini* is energy like heat, electricity, magnetism etc is there any research paper published in any scientific journals?
- If she has cured chronic incurable diseases will she be able to cure a few patients suffering from such diseases of the patients produced by ANS?

There was news that during demonstrations God woman failed to meet the critics. Thus Nirmaladevi's claims refuted. She described Rajanish a *Bilandar* (rascal), Mahesh yogi *Mahachor* (big thief) and Satya Saibaba liar.

Rajansh gave one discourse in 1981 in which he stated that there are plenty silly people in this world where any Indian can have disciples. You only have to be an Indian and you can become Guru. He said, "One of my disciples Nirmal Srivastava came to my workshop in Nargol at Gujarat in 1970. While traveling on the way we stopped at Muktananda's *Ashram* While seeng Muktananda she questioned to me that if any common person can become Guru why not I? I replied that yes, you can. She was a disciple of me for nearly ten years. She does not possess any meditation technique or spiritual power. She got inspiration of becoming Mata from Muktananda."

Medical science also does not endorse the existence of *Kundalini* or its power. *Kundalini yoga* is like trying to fly in a plane without engine. The text of *Kundalini yoga* itself had explained that *Sushuma Nadi* is a subtle *Nadi* which cannot be perceived physically nor dissected and can be perceived only in mind during meditation. All systems of meditations are artificial methods to lead one to self-hypnosis, which can project as real whatever we imagine in the process.

Mataji arranges marriages of her foreign disciples with her Indian disciples or their sons and daughters. Many Indian women have been cheated in this way.

TB Khilare

OCCULT PRACTICES ACT:

State Government Not Serious

In spite of promises and assurances by Congress regimes in Maharashtra, the proposed Maharashtra Act for Prevention of occult practices, has still not seen the light of the day, said Dr Narendra Dabholkar, executive president of ANS that is actively involved in the formulation of the Act.

"The upper house of assembly had approved the bill in 1995 but it is in suspension due to the lack of political will." Said Dabholkar.

According to ANS members, the bill doesn't target any community or rituals. Dipak Girme, an office-bearer says, "it is sad the bill was opposed by the legislators of Congress in the floor of the last assembly session although they had supported it in the upper house in 1995," said Girme.

Dabholkar said there is an immediate need to promulgate law which prevents unscrupulous persons from taking advantage of sentiments and psychological weakness of individuals. Admitting that there is a concern among the legislators that the proposed Act will target the cultural and religious rituals, Dabholkar said, "The Bill strives to curb occult practices and practitioners and not religious or cultural rituals".

The ANS, which works to curtail occult practices and superstitions came up with the idea of such a Bill in the 90s and took the help of the retired judges and Indian Police Service officials to formulate various clauses.

Courtesy: *Indian Express*

DISCUSSIONS ON ANTI-SUPERSTITION

One year ago on the wee hours I have always maintained that superstitions in any form are detrimental to the growth of a society. A society goes through what can be called 'Culture Rot' when superstitions become the way of life. All this becomes all the more important when you think about India and the harmful effects superstitions have had on Indian society. This widespread prevalence and acceptance has a great deal to do with the illiteracy in the Indian populace. It is however not limited to the ability to read and write. Anyone familiar with Indian society knows well enough how far and deep it has been 'infected' by the biggest superstition of them all,

Astrology. *Neta na Abhineta* (Actor nor Politician) are spared by it. In spite of this widespread 'disease' in our Indian society, there are some who are taking up the challenge to educate the common man about the futility of such 'Andhashraddha' (Blind Faith). One such group I have come to know of is the 'Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmulan Samiti' (Maharashtra Superstition Eradication Committee). They host a website very aptly registered as www.antisuperstition.com. I've found some very interesting articles on this website and would highly recommend it.

The one campaign I am really glad that MANS has undertaken is to push the Maharashtra Government to pass an anti-superstition bill. This will be a significant development for India if it goes through. There are a number of problems that MANS foresees to get this bill to go through. The biggest one being the common quirk, "One man's faith is another man's blind faith or superstition." This is the reason that for this bill to go through, MANS is aiming at not the belief itself but people who exploit others for monetary gain. In my opinion this is the only way to go about it. You cannot impose your thoughts on others, however, you can setup laws that prevent the exploitation of belief systems.

One other point I found interesting is that MANS is not including astrology in this list of superstitions for this bill. If they did, I don't think the bill would last even a few minutes on the floor of the State Legislative Assembly! I find this a very practical approach and agree with them that it's better to have small successes under your belt before going out to sea to get the big fish. Since I don't live in India at the moment, I do not know how much coverage this story has received from traditional big media there. However, rediff.com did carry a piece on this on November 04, 2003.

In conclusion, I once again urge you to visit the MANS website and read about the cause they are supporting, the plans they have in place and some of their ongoing projects. They print a monthly newsletter in English and from the one they have posted online, MANS looks like a great bunch of people working for an even greater cause.

Prashant Mullick

Selva responds Prashant, They publish "Thought & Action" and I am curious to see if they would be interested in releasing the content in copyleft terms. That would open up a lot of possibilities. A google search for "india+rationalists" throws up many other stition. I think astrology is an empirical science. People have done a study of dates and times of birth and its relation with "fate". As with all empirical science, the prediction is as good as the data; unless more data is collected and correlations sought, the empirical rules will cease to apply anymore. Recently, there was a scientific study that showed that people born in summer are more likely to be optimistic than those born in winter. This was published in a reputed journal. Just because "astrology" is an old science doesn't mean that its an arbitrary science. The problem I see is in blind faith, in resigning to your "fate" based on astrological predictions.

Prashant Mullick says: *Niket, It is tough to buy the argument of astrology being an empirical science when the methods, assumptions and predictions differ as widely as they do between 'experts' of astrology. A statistically significant number of astrologers cannot even come together and make the same prediction about an event when they are given identical data to play with. How do you reconcile yourself with this fact?*

Prakash Ghatpande Says:

Dear friends Recently we have published Marathi book " YANDA KARTAVYA AAHE ?". This book contains information of many questions frequently asked by common people regarding the subject "Marriage & Astrology" such as "What is Gamelan " " what is Mangal Dosha ?" "Is horoscope matching necessary at the time of marriage?" and so many. Before making any conclusion on this subject it is necessary to Know the subject. The book is supposed to read by common people thro' sceptic angle, sceptic people thro' general angle & astrologers thro' introverted angle. Useful for sceptic, Astrologers and common people The previous book of auther" Jyotishakade Janyapurvee.." was recommended by Prof Jayant Narlikar for its usefulness for common people Prashant's Observation on anti-superstition Bill is quiet superb. Astrology is not a science but it is faith. I' m astro-critic and former astrologer. Astrology will live till human beings are alive. Uncertainty is main cause. Man can't be 100 % rational. He is not biochemical robot having feed of rationality and scientific temperament. That's why astrology works. Now don't ask how? Answer is never ending process

Recommended books in Marathi:

Yanda Kartya Aahe ? pp 40. Price- Rs 20.00

Jyotishakade Janyapurvee..... Prashnottaratoon Susanvaad pp 102 Price- Rs 60.00

Author of the above books is Prakash Ghatpande,

Publishers of both the above books: Soudnya Services, "Orion" CTS No 695, S.No. 6 NR AjinkyaNagari, KarveNagar. Pune 411052

Books Available at Sadhana Grantha Pradarshan & Media Centre, 431, Shaniwar Peth, Opp Shaniwar Peth. Police Chowky.. Pune 411030

IS AYURVEDA OUTDATED?

Several parallel therapies have come to light in the last three centuries. In India the so far neglected Ayurved too has been receiving attention of the medical practitioners. Ayurvedic herbal medicines are being scientifically examined in India and abroad although the investigations are yet quite rare. To restore Ayurved to its past magnificence is very difficult though not impossible. But to make it possible, first and foremost the Ayurved Pandits will have to rise above their obstinate insistence that not an iota can or need be changed in the original theory of the ancient science.

In science every thing is changeable; nothing is unchanging. All scientific knowledge is objective. In addition the scientific 'truths' are provisional, very few of them capable of becoming eternal. Einstein changed Newton's theory, which till then was thought to be unchangeable. The 'Books', the myths, spirituality, faith and innocence have no place in the scientific method. It is a plain, straightforward process wherein facts are accepted only when proved to be correct. Every truth, every fact should stand repeated verification and there is always the possibility of its being proved false. Every scientist has to keep this mind. The scientific method consists of conducting experiments, analyzing the results, drawing inferences from the results, deducing a theoretical proposition and using the theory to solve the present and future problems of mankind. Modern medicine has

readily accepted all these rules of science. It is based on concrete evidence. Ayurved, too must accept these rules in order to attain the status of science in the modern age. No ancient science, however, be it Indian or Western can stand these modern tests of science.

It is unscientific to decide the worth of any system on the basis of its far-reaching antiquity. Both Ayurved and the western medicinal systems originated during the Iron Age. Both were greatly influenced in their development by the philosophical trends of those days. Both insist on safeguarding moral values. A holistic approach to health is prominent in both the systems. The five elements, the seasons, environment, diet, thinking, exercise, sleep, ethics and mind and their close relation to health are discussed in details in the ancient tome called Hippocratic Corpus. The modern books on medicine too take into account mental illness, psychotherapy, environmental remedies, sleep therapy, exercise, diet and ethical values. Like Ayurved modern medicine too is holistic. In the ancient days the concepts of health and diseases were vague. But the ancient gurus despite the total absence of any technology erected their huge edifice of medicine only with the help of their senses, observation, reasoning and judgment! This, however, is not enough in the modern times that change rapidly beyond imagination. The Westerners realized this quite early while we have yet to grasp it.

Both the old systems lacked adequate knowledge of physiology. The Ayurvedic concept of Wat (wind or air), Pitta (bile), and cough and the similar Western concept of Humors are both rejected by the modern medicine. But the theory that a proper balance between the 'Tridosh'- Wat, Pitta and Cough- keeps the body healthy and imbalance in them causes ill health is the foundation of Ayurvedic diagnosis and treatment even today. During the ancient and middle ages, dissecting a human body was a taboo. The knowledge of physiology remained primitive and the above misleading concepts ruled the field of medicine. The rapid progress of western medicine started after Andrius Vesalius investigated into human physiology and William Harvey discovered the circulatory system of blood. The next mile stone was laid by Batista Morgagni by dissecting dead bodies and studying in detail the affected organs in them. This opened the door to the basic science of pathology for Western medicine. The invention of the microscope took pathology from the level of large organs to that of the microscopic level of cells. Nothing like this happened in Ayurved. On the contrary the misconceptions of the original science received a long lease of life. No wonder that the therapy based on these misconceptions proved largely ineffective.

In both medicinal systems herbs and herbal medicines, minerals and organic products were freely used. Many of the modern medicines like aspirin, digitalis, opium, quinine, etc., are developed from medicinal herbs. The Cardiologist from Mumbai, Dr. Rustum Jal Vakil developed an effective medicine on hypertension from Sarpagandha, the most celebrated medicinal herb in Ayurved. But the experiments that he conducted in his investigation were in accordance with the modern scientific method. Innumerable such medicines are mentioned in the ancient Ayurveda. Their effectiveness, though, was determined solely on the basis of observation. This is not acceptable to modern scientists. Austin Bradford Hill, a British scientist, invented a method called 'Randomized Double Blind Controlled Clinical Trials' to determine the efficacy of medicines. This method has universally been adopted by scientists. The Western scientists have accepted the directive that detailed knowledge of the good or bad effect of a medicine, its metabolism in the body, assimilation in the blood and excretion, and its good or bad effect on the organs of the body must be obtained before a product can be used as a medicine. One dare not make any such statement regarding the Ayurvedic medicines or practitioners.

Both Ayurvedic and Western medicines made use of 'Panchakarma' (five types of treatment procedures) in the olden days. Vomiting, using purgative, sweating, enema, and bleeding were popular procedures adopted in both the therapies. Bleeding was considered panacea, so much so, that king Charles the second of England and George Washington of USA lost their lives to this brutal treatment. In some Ayurvedic medicines heavy metals are used. Modern tests have proved these metals to be detrimental to the functioning of kidneys. Kayakalpa and Vajikaran (regaining youthful state and virility respectively) are purely imaginary Ayurvedic concepts. Even Westerners were taken by these concepts for a while but they discarded them when their futility was disclosed. These few examples reveal that many of the old therapies were aimlessly pursued out of ignorance.

This, however, does not mean that all that is said in Ayurveda is worthless. Most of the Ayurvedic discussion of symptoms of ailments, classification of ailments and their remedies, the method of examining the patient and the importance given to ethics is reasonable and convincing. Sushrutacharya had made excellent progress in surgery. He invented many surgical instruments. He was an expert in mending deformed noses and mutilated ears. Even Western scientists concede that he was the first plastic surgeon. But his Indian followers have given up surgery altogether. Sushrutacharya had advised that medicine should enrich itself by making use of all other sciences. The Western medical fraternity heeded to it and developed their science up to the level of organ transplantation while his Ayurvedic inheritors completely ignored it.

Modern medicine investigated physiological bio-chemical reactions and processes up to the microscopic level of the cells. Innumerable scientists conducted countless experiments. As long as Ayurved does not adopt the Western scientists' insistence that every therapy should stand exacting scientific tests, it will not attain the status of science. Not a single Ayurvedic medicine is mentioned in the developed nations' books on medicines. For, it still relies solely on the five senses, reason, judgment and observation. It ought to go beyond this. Ayurvedic systems were developed with reference to the old times and the then available knowledge. To seek points of reference for today's genetic revolution in the ancient procedures is utterly foolish. It is like transplanting a child's head on to the body of a fully matured man. It is not only worthless but harmful too. Our ancient guides and leaders in medicine undoubtedly were genius great thinkers. But one can't afford to forget that the science they developed was in accordance with their times and in the absence of today's scientific and technological advance. So we should wisely pick and choose only the acceptable portion of it.

Dr. Chandrakant Shankar Wagale

Courtesy: *Maharashtra Times*

(Translated from the article in Maharashtra Times, Sunday 17th April 2005)

“ART OF DECEIVING” GURU FLOORED

A rich man's guru, who is lately trying to strengthen the ruling upper caste, is three times 'Sri' Ravi Shankar of the "Art of living" fame. He is the latest menace of the other and more famous Satya Saibaba is ageing and dying without lifting his own immediate surrounding even by an inch. Fortunately Ravi Shankar is deceiving his Jatwala and other over-fed upper castes who have plenty of time , money and hence too willing to be fooled. The other day in Delhi at the India

Today conclave, the “laughing guru” fell flat unable to fight back the noted poet Javed Akhtar’s boxers and bouncers.

Upper class produces lots of spiritual men (and women too!) to fool the rich and make money. Ravi Shankar has emerged as a top crook with the support of the big publicity his jati cronies assure in their “national” papers. Much of the press reports boosting this guru are found to be false or exaggerated but none bother about them.

The Asian age Delhi correspondent Kounteya Sinha says:

Talking on “spirituality – halo or hoax” Akhtar took on “modern gurus” from the word go. Taking a direct dig at Ravi Shankar by saying, “that spirituality should be more than teaching the rich how to breathe”, the poet claimed that “modern day gurus” have opened a chain of ashrams where the restless elite buy spiritual fast food”. Claiming that “spirituality was the tranquiliser of the rich”, Akhtar also took the example of unhappy rich wives who needed a shoulder to cry on after being ignored by husbands “who were either busy with work or with other women”. “So they seek the help of modern age gurus, who promise to rid them of all miseries. The spiritual get-togethers today are nothing less than points of contact and network building exercises for the elite. Like all corporate hunches found on golf course don’t necessary love golf, spiritual get-togethers aren’t necessarily spiritual.

Pointing out people must think with their brains and see through the garb of these gurus, “who themselves claim to have achieved nirvana but can’t promise to take you there”, Akhtar added: “spiritual leaders need to do more than teach about cosmic consciousness. Where are the spiritualists when there are communal tensions? How many have taken Dalits to a temple where they are not allowed to enter? Gautam Buddha, Krishna and Kabir had all raised their voices against social injustice’.

Akhtar said: arms, drugs and spirituality were today the world’s three biggest industries. “Most of the modern day gurus have affluent clientele that provide him power, status and money. In return the rich get a crash course in spirituality, nirvana and cosmic consciousness in four easy lessons”.

We can do nothing with these modern gurus. Over 85% of India’s population is untouched by their spiritual charm. However Ravi Shankar not only sells his “spiritualism” to the sex-starved upper cast women but subtly indulges in promoting Hindu Nazism. In Bangalore he has established a multi-million dollar empire employing Brahmin boys and girls. But oppressed world of India doesn’t take him seriously. He fools only those willing to be fooled. He has chosen some Brahmin ex-journalists for public relations who have done excellent job. But such godmen come and go, raising lot of dust but without raising the level of humans even by an inch.

This is called “Art of Deceiving”. We wish such frauds all success.

Courtesy: Dalit Voice

BHAJAN KIRTAN CHANNELS

Till about three years ago, they were dubbed “Bhajan Kirtan” channels, watched by the very old or the very bored. But not any more. Most of these channels have gone high-tech and claim a viewership that cuts across all age groups, prompting one of the channel managers to say that an overdose of sex on TV has sent viewers scurrying to their channels.

There were just three “spiritual” channels three years back. Now Astha, Sanskar, Sadhana, God and Q TV are all in the fray. They claim a membership of over 2.5 crore, which is almost half the total cable homes in the country.

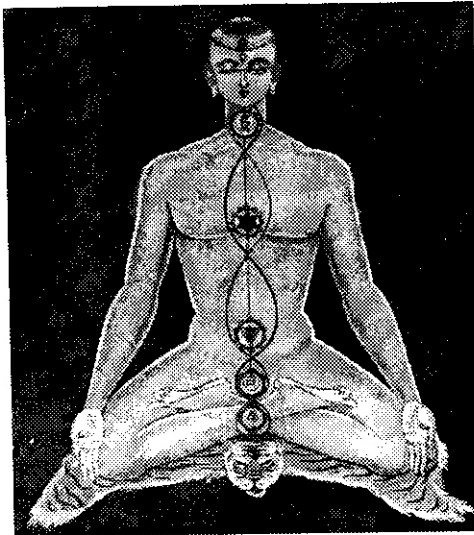
From the humble Bhajans, doled out by the hour, some channels like the two-year-old Sadhana have gone online. The channel, says managing director Rakesh Gupta, has started an SMS service by which viewers can contact their favorite guru for blessings/advice. So, if you want to know from Sudhanshuji Maharaj if it's right day to looking for a job, all you have to do is type “7333” and “SSUD”. Says Gupta, the channel has empaneled 40 spiritual leaders. “We get 20000 SMS every day from all kinds of viewers,” says Gupta who has tied-up with 85 cellular operators and has now got into an arrangement with Echostar to beam into North America and Europe. His competitor, Astha, the oldest in the group, has Guru Ramdev, who has become a household name, teaching his brand of yoga.

For God TV, which beams out of Israel, advertisements are a strict no-no. “We don't want anything to come between viewers and his faith” says the channel's spokesperson. Currently beaming into 2.1 crore homes, God TV pays a substantial carriage fee to cable operators. “Carriage fee is the norm of the industry and most of the channels pay to be on the cable network.” Says an official. The channel also sells airtime to “select ministries”. The rates are less than 50 per cent of the normal channel rates and the programmes range from teachings of the Bible to music slots, and programmes for children. Cable operators say they get paid anywhere between Rs one lakh and above. Depending on the number of households they cater to. “For many people God channel is a source of encouragement, hope and joy.” Says an official from channel.

Amrita TV, launched recently from Kerala, shares the sentiment. The channel, headed by former Infosys employee Sudhakar Jayaram, has been inspired by Mata Amritanandmayi. He says he wants to incorporate everything feminine in his channel. “Gentleness, tolerance and kindness – the channel is guided by these principles as far as programmes are concerned,” says Jayaram who returned from San Francisco last year after a meeting with Amritanandmayi, who has ten minute programme twice a week on the channel. “The channel is inspired by Mother but is not on spiritual overdrive,” claims Jayaram.

The cost of running these channels – about Rs 10 crore per annum – has been nominal compared to the returns.

Anuradha Raman
Courtesy: *Indian Express*



KUNDALINI COMPLICATIONS

There is a great danger in raising Kundalini in the first place: it may not turn off or the state it produces may become addictive. Having taught upward meditation for decades, I have seen many cases of aborted careers, broken marriages, disassociated psyches and neurological illnesses that were caused by kundalini.

This is a partial list of the complications that can arise from a Kundalini awakening, particularly if one tries to force an awakening that their mind and body will be unprepared for when overwhelmed, or worse, by a premature Kundalini eruption:

- An overload of one's nervous system with the potential to cause a break with reality, necessitating a hospital stay and medical treatment. In other warnings about Kundalini even madness is claimed to be a pitfall for a person who unwittingly forces an awakening without a guru (though having a guru is no guarantee of a trouble-free awakening: I know from personal experience that if you force Kundalini you can overload your nervous system to the point that you feel like you are walking a tightrope between sanity and insanity for days, weeks, and in extreme cases, even years.
- More disturbing is the fact that many people taking meditation or yoga classes are not forewarned about the potential for Kundalini complications. When the fireworks start, the teachers, and most Gurus, are powerless to help (Spiritual Abandonment is more widespread than you would imagine) in spite of any assurances to the contrary. I have heard from many people who have found this out to their dismay.
- Short or long-term disorientation where one spaces in and out of higher planes and is rendered unable to focus long enough to be able to work. I have seen a number of cases where people have been debilitated by Kundalini and struggle for years trying to correct the imbalances, often with no success and much despair.

- Sexual dysfunction: I know of several people unable to have normal relationships with their partners due to the workings of the Kundalini current in the genital areas. I have read of others with the same conditions. This usually passes in time, but I know of individuals who have been burdened with it for years.
- Gastro Intestinal Disorders: I once had a condition that a Guru in India said was caused by my raising Kundalini energy pressing upon the colon area. Other people have suffered worse fates.
- When Kundalini becomes overwhelming, it can make one feel as though they are on the brink of losing their mind, and cause constant fear.
- Nightly dreams where one leaves the body; in some cases a person feels as if they are being tormented by negative entities that seem too real and cause one to wake up in total fear, thinking they are doomed to experience these hellish dreams over and over.
- Excessive Kundalini building up in the head when one tries to study or read for extended periods of time along with waking up all through the night from the increased Kundalini energy flowing into the brain (this can put an end to a person's pursuit of higher education, as I can attest, and leave one tired all day from insufficient sleep).
- Problems that surface years after the initial awakening: If you are having what you consider to be a flawless Kundalini experience, do not think you are out of the woods. I had what could be considered an ideal Kundalini awakening for about 7 years until things went awry; after 30 years of Kundalini rising in me I am still limited by my once flawless awakening.
- Disturbingly, some peoples' egos seem to expand along with their consciousness when they have what they consider to be an advanced Kundalini awakening. I was somewhat shocked when I first came across this, being of the mind that Kundalini would purify any blocks within people and fashion them into human beings equivalent to the Mother Teresas and the Dalai Lamas of this world. Not so; some of the poorest representations of spiritual growth gone wrong have been people with advanced Kundalini experiences, or alleged to be fully enlightened, some of the finest have been those with the most challenging and problem-ridden Kundalini awakenings.

- Puran Bair

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INCULCATING SECULARISM

Religion is not a basic drive of humankind, despite its vice like grip on large populations all over the world. The Chimpanzees whose brains are comparable to those of human beings never show any kind of religious behavior as such, although they do show ritualistic behavior patterns. The biologically secular man seems to have invented religion while deliberating upon the causes of events in the absence of required information. This phantom, that is his own creation and that has captivated his imagination, is now playing havoc with human civilization. The same reasoning that prompted him to invent religion will now help him to go back to his natural state of secularism.

India being a multi-racial, multi-religious and multi-cultural state had to be secular and 'Secularism' has been incorporated as one of the guiding principles in its constitution, which many advanced democracies have failed to do. However the constitution does not change the mindset of the people, both educated and uneducated ones. Secularism has to be inculcated in the minds of people to prevent the frenzy of religion pushing civilization back into the medieval darkness. A beginning in this direction has been made by an organization, called 'Rayat Shikshan Sanstha,' meant to provide schools for the peasantry and other village occupants of Maharashtra, in India. This organization runs a total number of 436 middle schools in addition to primary schools and D.Ed. colleges spread over 14 districts of Maharashtra.

Since the beginning of nineteenth century there has been a chain of religious-social reformers in Maharashtra. Its leading lights, to name just a few, were Jotiba Phule, Shahu Maharaj, Ranade, Agarkar, Karve and so on. Jotiba Phule started an organization, called 'Satya Shodhak Samaj' meaning a 'Truth Finding Society'. Their aim was to fight against orthodoxy, ritualism, casteism, gender discrimination and all other social and religious ills of the society. Karma Veer Bhaurao Patil alias Anna, was an active worker of this organization. He realized, that no change could be brought about by merely preaching or organizing protests or such other activities. To achieve the aim of social change one must begin at the beginning. Thus was born 'Rayat Shikshan Sanstha' that started opening schools, with secular orientation, in as many villages and small towns as possible. In one of the schools, run by this institution, Kumar Mandape, a teacher, began to put the principle of secularism into practice.

Mandape noticed that Bhaurao Patil, a man of action, who rejected

all kind of religious ritualism was himself deified and worshipped like a god. In almost all schools belonging to this organization, every function began with by worshipping Anna. A big photograph of his would be placed on a chair and garlanded. Vermilion and turmeric powder would be applied on his forehead. Incense would be burned, lamp would be lighted and a coconut would be broken, this entire ritual ends with a prayer begging for Anna's blessings. The organization issued circulars to all schools to stop this practice that ridiculed the man of action that Bhaurao Patil was. But to no avail! Mandape who was greatly disturbed by this was presented with an opportunity, which he grabbed with both his hands and made good use of it. In 2002, he was made inspector of the Satara and Sholapur section with 129 middle and higher middle schools, three D.Ed. colleges and five primary schools in his jurisdiction. Mandape immediately began to work on his mission.

His enthusiasm got another boost when he attended a meeting of inspectors, called by Prof. N. D. Patil, Chairman of the organization. Prof. Patil spelled out the organization's unambiguous principles and gave the inspectors specific targets to be achieved. They were: putting a stop to the ritual worship of Bhaurao from all schools; banning all religious poojas or rituals or recitations in the schools; instead, teaching and singing in chorus meaningful and appropriate poems, arranging meetings of the teachers and village people and discussing issues like the Gujarat massacre in the meetings and instilling secularism in their minds, was to be encouraged. In addition to this, Mandape has a background of fifteen years of active work in the Andhashraddha Nirmoolan Samiti (ANS). This has provided him with a strong intellectual foundation and experience in social work. Mandape started in right earnest. He fixed up a schedule of visiting schools. He made it a point to remain present in the school before the assembly and carefully observe the prayer, value education program, and singing of national anthem, national song and other songs by way of prayers. The school inspection started after this first session. On one such occasion, Mandape was astonished to see that all children sat down after the usual prayers and songs and started reciting 'Atharva Sheersha' a prayer in Sanskrit of Lord Ganesh. On enquiring who taught the children this religious prayer and to what purpose, Mrs. Joshi claimed the credit for it and explained that it trained the children in Sanskrit recitation. Mandape wanted to know whether Sanskrit was taught in the school. It was not. All this in a school

where Secularism is the guiding principle! The fanatic Hinduism bent on preserving the so-called Hindu culture has affected our teaching fraternity! They mistake ritualism and proficiency in reciting Sanskrit, shlokas for culture.

Next week Mandape visited a school headed by a Dalit. The assembly session was well planned. Mandape was happy to see all children, teachers and even the headmaster squatting on the ground. And to his utter surprise, children started singing Gayatri Mantra-the famous Sanskrit prayer to the Sun god. The headmaster, habituated to appropriate the credit for all laudable things claimed that he accomplished this difficult feat. 'It is quite easy', he said, 'I bought the cassette and repeated it time and again till the children learnt it by heart!' Mandape ordered to stop it then and there. Later in the meeting with the teachers he explained, 'we have a constitution that is secular which means we do not have any National Religion. There are many other countries like ours who do not have any National Religion. In such countries, every body has the freedom to follow his faith and observe religious rituals privately but not in public institutions like ours. For us the constitution is sacrosanct and no religious rituals or prayers of any kind and any faith can be allowed here. There is no room for worshipping any deity and religious prayers in the assembly. The concepts like providence, fate or destiny have no place in our institutions and teachers should consciously desist from preaching them.' At this, one teacher got up and said, 'Sir, it is all right to tell us all the don'ts. But will you tell us what to do, what songs or prayers we can sing?'

Mandape realized that he had to not only compile a list of songs appropriate for the age groups but also set them to tune and train the teachers himself. He changed his routine of inspecting the schools in the morning and started visiting the schools again in the afternoon. He asked the children to gather on the school ground around 4 o'clock with their notebooks and pencils. There he taught children appropriate poems written by great Marathi poets, set in tunes of popular filmy songs or prayers. Many schools adopted the new prayers enthusiastically. He thought that it is necessary to reach many more schools simultaneously. Mandape thought of organizing teachers' workshop to explain to the teachers the aims and objectives of the organization as well as its educational policy and administrative system. Such a workshop was arranged. On the second day Dr. Patil was to inaugurate a vocational guidance program. Mandape wanted to present his group songs to initiate the program. Some teachers opposed it saying that they did not want to give any socio-cultural reformist touch to a vocational guidance program. Despite this opposition Mandape did collect a few willing teachers, thoroughly practiced a couple of songs

and presented the group item on the stage. Before presenting the songs Mandape took care to give cyclostyled copies of the songs to all guests seated on the dais as well as all the audience. To Mandape's delight N.D. Patil and all the honorable guests started singing with the teachers in chorus. Every body, including those who had initially opposed Mandape appreciated the effort. They all praised the choice as well as the tunes of the songs.

As the word prayer does not sound secular enough, these songs were baptized as 'opening songs' of the schools. Mandape studied many poets and selected a number of poems. His criteria were: songs extolling freedom, dignity of the country and the province of Maharashtra; inspiring and awakening songs; songs glorifying knowledge, search for truth, scientific research and technological advance and songs instilling scientific attitude and eradication of superstition. He made a long list of all these poems and sent it to all the headmasters to make their choice. His second difficulty was the bashfulness of the teachers. They felt nervous to go to the stage or train the students to sing. Mandape took such shy teachers to the stage and started training the students who sang after him. Gradually the teachers overcame their timidity and started singing. Later they were able to train their students too.

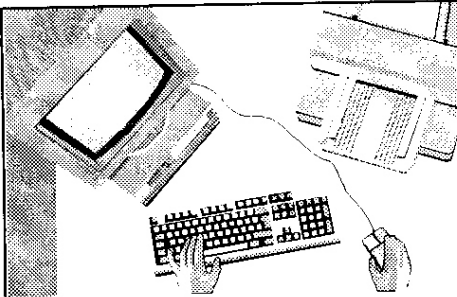
The poojas and worshipping deities merrily went on in many a school. But the strong letter pulling up a powerful and venerated headmaster had remarkable impact on other schools. Mandape used that letter as a weapon to make other offenders fall in line. He used to read it loudly in the teachers' meeting after explaining to them the organization's principles and policies. In 90% of the schools belonging to this organization Poojas and worships of all kinds have stopped and the pictures of deities removed from the walls.

Although Mandape and others were successful in doing away with poojas of Hindu deities, idolizing Bhaurao Patil, the founder of the institution, still continued. In one school, Mandape was requested to garland the photograph of this great man. Mandape did so. Next he was requested to break a coconut in front of the photograph. Mandape refused to do so. In the evening Mandape held teachers' meeting and explained why he refused to break a coconut. Anna certainly was a great man, a man of action, but all the same a human being like all of us. He roamed the length and breadth of Maharashtra barefoot to raise funds and enlist people to assist him in his work and awaken the village folk to the needs of education and reform. He was not a god and never claimed to be one. To break a coconut in front of his image is an insult to the great man and the principles by which he lived his simple life. Moreover a coconut with its two eyes and a tuft of coir is a symbol of a human head

and breaking it symbolizes human sacrifice. Anna was an honest disciple of Mahatma Phule who abhorred all rituals. It is high time we put a stop to this ritual signifying violence. We should not deify any great men. Instead we should endeavor to imbibe their thoughts, their principles and try to carry on the good work they started to the best of our abilities. But we excuse our own inaction by belittling ourselves in comparison with their greatness. Deifying great men is nothing but escapism. It is like singing praises of the lord and leaving every thing to his will in order that our own conscience stops pricking us for the evil of this world.

Politicians and political parties vie with each other to flaunt their religiosity. Some are trying to change history and achieve the unachievable. Some are busy disturbing communal harmony to impress sectarian vote banks. Some spread myths of miracles and fool the people. But there is a ray of hope. Some sane people are trying to separate religion from state and politics. They are the followers of Mahatma Phule, Gadge Baba - a genuine saint who never visited a temple, being busy serving the people, though illiterate, but walked across Maharashtra preaching people to educate their young ones at any cost - and many other selfless reformers. They are the workers of organizations like the ANS, the Rayat Shikshan Sanstha and innumerable other organizations and individuals working at grass root level without any political interest or label. The common man is awakening; the fact is revealed in the election results. The credit goes to the innumerable conscientious workers like Kumar Mandape who are active humanists to the core.

- Deepak Girme



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VIVEKVAHINI'S JOURNEY

The rationalist's awareness meet at Mohol and the conference related to women's education and superstition at Latur received tremendous response from youth who came in large numbers. The credit for such mass awareness of these issues amongst the young should go to Vivekvahini. This organization is an independent functioning body, but works closely with our Andha Shraddha Nirmoolan activities; they are our friends.

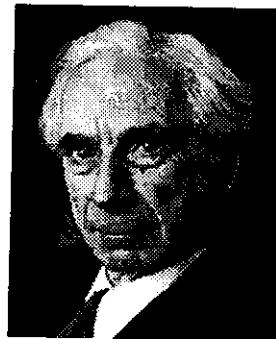
Four years ago, a science awareness program was conducted at Latur. This addresses the need of science teachings in Maharashtra. In the educational sector, science awareness and teaching through hands on experimentation was proposed and implemented throughout the region; from Nandurbar to Sindhudurg. I gave a talk on this matter to about 70 to 80 colleges within this region. What I realized from this activity is that the idea of Vivekvahini was appreciated and received by the students, the teachers, the professors, the principals and even educational managers. They found it engaging and interesting. After this response, the then Maharashtra Minister for Education, Mr. Dilip Valse Patil had agreed that there was an encouraging atmosphere in his ministry to lend a helping hand to such activities. A state level conference on this issue was held at Ahamdpur in Latur district. Mr. Kisanraoji Deshmukh was elected as a chairman of conference. Dr. B.L. Bhole from Nagpur, Prof. A. Jadhav from Latur and me were invited as guest speakers at this conference. During the conference it was decided that Prof. N.D. Patil, Dr Ram Takawale, Sadanand Varde will work as guides and advisers to Vivekvahini activities. The VC also upheld the idea of Vivekvahini as the need of the hour.

Today there are many student organizations but it is an open secret that a supposedly independent and autonomous student union may be under external political influences; they may be running their activities



under the influences of political masters. National Service and other groups do exist in colleges. Students do participate wholeheartedly in many of these groups. But the expenses for running these activities and administration of such groups are on the college itself. Literary discussion and Art circles and other local interest clubs do exist in colleges and universities. These generally have enthusiastic youngsters working for it. But activities carried out by Vivekvahini are quite unique and different from all the other activities.

In short, the idea behind Vivekvahini is to make everyone aware that being a rational human being is one of the rare gifts that humans possess from the time of the birth of logical reasoning and thought. No one in the animal world possesses such talents. This talent has to be nurtured and developed so that a human being evolves into being a better human being. Vivekvahini is thus a movement that gives directions and selfhelp tips for developing rational thoughts. The four important directions for Vivekvahini are, 'Your progress is in your own hands; you want rights but duty first; progressive path is the path for all members; everyday half an hour should be devoted to thought provoking readings, another half hour for invigorating exercises and in a year buy at least one handloom garment and stay away from all addictions.' If these four points are followed, it is reasonable to believe that rational minded volunteers could be molded. And it has been proven also. But there is also an important aspect; the nurturing of this newly developed rational human being will have a widespread societal implication. The Indian constitution provides that a rational human being is able to confidently state and stand by his rational values. Scientific temper, social justice, equality amongst men and women, secularism, are all fundamental principles enshrined in the Indian Constitution. Unfortunately even the teachers are ignorant of the meanings and implications of these, so what can be expected of the students? Vivekvahini's activities are striving to make the teachers aware of these things so that through the teachers, the young students could be made aware of the rational principles written in our constitution.



This work is not easy but it is possible and the results have been seen in mere four years of Vivekvahini's activities.

In last three years, Vivekvahini has formally reached about 55 colleges and is active there in the form of a club or a society. Unfortunately the activities are still in very preliminary stages. Professors and teachers reacted with the students about Vivekvahini, the students liked the idea, then some discussion forums, and programs were arranged. But not much has happened beyond this. Interestingly, in Dhule, under the leadership of Vilas Chavan, and in Beed, under the guidance of Prof. Savita Shete, some remarkably good work is taking shape. Here, in some Vivekvahini centers, 50 to 100 students participate. There are weekly meetings organized by students themselves. Several activities have been undertaken enthusiastically and the planned targets have been achieved also. It is observed that such activities are having a very positive impact on the students and the colleges also. It would be a good idea to see how these positive benefits are replicated in other places also.

Recently a significant milestone was crossed by Vivekvahini when it organized a meet in Aurangabad on the 12th and 13th of February 2005; a state level committee was formed to oversee its outreach. From the six universities, teachers from sixteen colleges were represented in this forum. All agreed that the activities of Vivekvahini should be started in their colleges at the beginning of the academic year itself so that the idea behind Vivekvahini is more effective. If a person becomes rational minded then it follows that he or she will not turn to superstitions and this would in turn reduce the need for activities directed towards eradication of superstitions. This tune generated during the meet was very appropriate and for our anti-superstition activities, this is indeed required.

Eradication of superstition in our society is a must and in addition it is needed that people develop a rational outlook all these are not worthless thoughts. These are inter-related to our daily lives. The need for social justice, Hindu-Muslim harmony, secularism thoughts and behaviours have to be inculcated amongst the volunteers of Vivekvahini. Similarly, those who are involved in the anti-superstition struggle should also develop and adapt rationalism and therefore to the principles of Vivekvahini. For this healthy, deep and open discussions, forums and camps have to be organized jointly by Vivekvahini and Andhashraddha Nirmoolan Samiti so that each helps the other in making strong, capable volunteers.

- Narendra Dabholkar

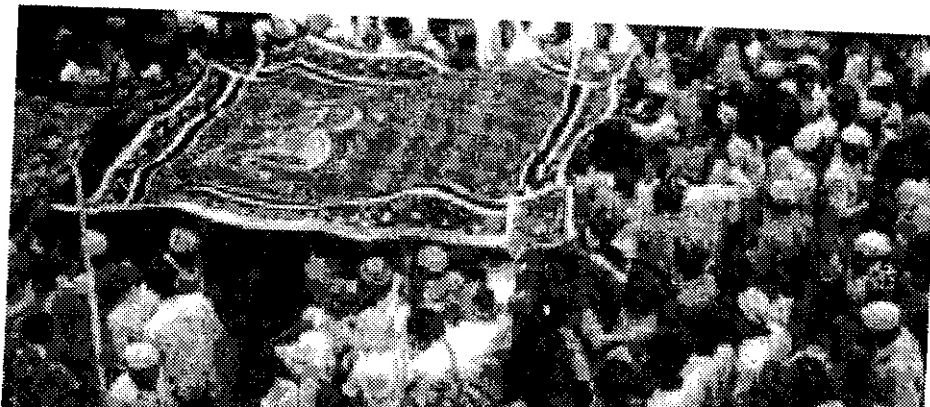
ABSURDITIES OF THE SHARIA

We cannot but have the lowliest contempt for all illogical and oppressive religious laws. What I am discussing now is some absurdities of the *Sharia*, i.e. Muslim religious laws. The source of my rendering of the laws is the magazine "The Secularist" of Bombay, March-April 1973 issue, in the article "Muslim Personal Law" by A.B. Shah, pp.61-64.

One absurdity of the *Sharia* is to divide its violations into two categories, one of crimes against "God" and the other of those against man. A crime of the former kind invites the "*hadd*" i.e. a fixed punishment which is a right or claim of "God" ("*hakk allah*") and from which no escape is possible through pardon or amicable settlement. In the crime of the second kind, whatever liability is incurred is the subject of a private claim ("*hakk adam*") and attracts no action by the state unless the aggrieved party asks for it.

What is more absurd is that, according to the *Sharia*, unlawful intercourse is a crime against "God" and the more severe "*hadd*" punishment for it is stoning to death (the less was previously flogging), whereas homicide is a crime against man and the survivors of the victim can pardon the murderer from any punishment whatsoever, on the payment of some blood money. This principle is applied in many Muslim countries even today. That means if a man has simple-minded or greedy family members, it would be safe for anyone to murder him and get away with it.

If any religion is really of "God", such situations would have been anticipated by the so-called "prophets".





WHO IS BLESSED? AND WHO IS A SAINT?

This refers to the news in the papers on around about the late pope John Paul II "beatifying" the nun Teresa ("Mother Teresa") of Calcutta; and later about her actual canonization. I wish to ask four questions.

First, it seems that only whom the pope "beatifies" or "canonizes" is a "blessed" or a "saint" respectively. How could the pope know? He could not have known more than any of us. Who knows what rascals all the prophets and

saints of this world actually were!

Second, the church is deliberately ignoring the arguments of various rationalist organisations against the fallacies of this particular "miracle" (cure of a girl in West Bengal, India) i.e. conveniently taking the patient out of circulation so as to prevent investigation, and the simple fact that she got cured by medical treatment.

Third, instead of harping on one "miracle", the Catholics should study some of Christopher Hitchens' accusations, e.g. of how, during Teresa's charge a 15-year-old boy was allowed to die of some curable disease when the medicinal facilities were easily available and affordable to the mission. If Teresa were really "blessed" or a "saint", the boy would have been cured with or without medical treatment: i.e. he should have at least been cured. But the fact is he died and was allowed to die. Also, Catholics should study Teresa's links with Duvalier of Haiti and how she praised him and his government.

Fourth, the pope was ailing from Parkinson's disease. Why did he not pray to Teresa? Who knows, if a miracle took place and he was cured, it would have been the second miracle required to "canonize" her. Then we would all have been happy: the pope for being cured, the Catholics for having Teresa canonized, and I for becoming a staunch catholic after seeing the miracle! The thing to ponder here is that when neither god nor human could do anything for the pope's Parkinson's disease, what could a dead woman, Teresa, do for him?

Nigel J. Shaughnessy

MATERIALISM AND SPIRITUALISM
PEOPLE'S MOVEMENT ON ERADICATION OF SUPERSTITION
VISHAWANTH SWAMI GETS AGARKAR THE AWARD
IT'S ALL IN THE MIND
MERCHANTS OF NIRVANA
ATROCITIES BY DEVARSHI LADY
CONFRONTATION OF SCIENCE AGAINST SUPERSTITION
CRITICAL LOOK AT NATUROPATHY
PROTEST AGAINST GADGE MAHARAJ
ASTROLOGERS ON WEATHER REPORT
LEARN SOCIAL JUSTICE FROM UNITED STATES
HEAVENLY MESS

Sin and Science

Every person who has reached social maturity in a modern city can say that the meaning of crime, sin, and science is self-evident. Most of us, in India at least, know that sin depends upon the particular religion professed; drinking wine is a sin for a Muslim, beef eating for a Hindu, while the Christian does both without a qualm. This variable concept of sin being no longer sufficient to regulate society, legal sanctions are applied to forbid certain actions which are labeled as crimes, to be punished by police and court action. A crime must be detected and the offender put through some-legal formalities before punishment becomes effective; retribution for sin can hardly be proved in most cases, hence is usually relegated to the next world or the next rebirth. For science, the consequences rest upon logical materialist interpretation of careful experiments or observations, independently of theological or juridical regulations. He who swallows a certain dose of poison must die whether the action is legal or not; allowing the proper number of bacteria to lodge in your system develops corresponding disease - whether God wills it or not - with a definite statistical frequency.

DD Kosambi

MATERIALISM AND SPIRITUALISM

Materialism and spiritualism are not two opposed abstract theories about the nature of the world, of small concern to ordinary practical folk. But they are opposed ways of interpreting and understanding every question, and consequently, they express opposite approaches in practice and lead to very different conclusions in terms of practical activity. Before trying to define materialism and spiritualism in general terms, let us consider how these two ways of understanding things are expressed in relation to certain simple and familiar questions. This will help us to grasp the significance of the distinction between a materialist and a spiritualist interpretation. First let us consider a very familiar natural phenomenon – a thunderstorm. What causes thunderstorms? A spiritualist way of answering this question is to say that thunderstorms are due to anger of god. Being angry he arranges for lightning and thunderbolts to descend upon mankind. The materialist way of understanding thunderstorms is opposed to this. The materialist will try to explain and understand thunderstorms as being solely due to what we call natural forces e.g. ancient materialists suggested that far from thunderstorms being due to the anger of gods, they were caused by material particles in the clouds banging against each other. That this particular explanation was wrong is not the point. The point is that it was an attempt at materialist as opposed to spiritualist explanation. Nowadays a great deal more is known about thunderstorms arising from the scientific investigation of the natural forces involved. Knowledge remains very incomplete but at

all events enough is known to make it quite clear that the explanation must be on materialist lines, so that the spiritualist explanation has become thoroughly discredited. It will be seen that while the spiritualist explanation tries to relate the phenomenon to be explained to some spiritual cause – in this case the anger of god – the materialist explanation relates to material causes. In this example, most educated people today would agree in accepting the materialist interpretation. This is because they generally accept the scientific explanation of natural phenomena and every advance of natural science is an advance in the materialist understanding of nature.

Let us take a second example, this time one arising from social life. For instance, why are there rich and poor? This is a question many people ask, especially the poor. The most straightforward spiritualist answer to this question is to say – it is because god made them so. It is the will of god that some should be rich and others poor. Those who favour this type of explanation say that it is all due to eternal “human nature”. The materialist, on the other hand, seeks the reason in the material, economic conditions of social life. If society is divided into rich and poor it is because the production of material means of life is so ordered that some have the possession of the land and other means of production while the rest have to work for them. On such questions therefore the difference between a materialist and spiritualist conception can be very important not merely in a theoretical but in a practical sense. A materialist concept of thunderstorms for example helps us to take precautions against them, such as fitting buildings with lightning conductors. But if our explanation of thunderstorms is spiritualist then all we do is watch and pray.

Spiritualism and Supernatural

Spiritualism is the way of interpreting things which regards the spiritual as prior to the material, where as materialism regards the material as prior. Spiritualism supposes that everything material is dependent on and determined by something spiritual, where as materialism recognises that everything spiritual is dependent on and determined by something material. And this difference manifests itself both in general and philosophical conceptions of the world as a whole, and in conceptions of particular things and events.

At the bottom, spiritualism is religion, theology. All spiritualism is the continuation of the religious approach to questions, even though particular spiritualist theories have shed their religious skin. Spiritualism is inseparable from superstition, belief in the supernatural, the mysterious and unknowable. The roots of the spiritualist conception of things are then the same as those of religion. Materialism on the other hand seeks for explanation in terms belonging to the material world, in terms of factors which we can verify understand and control.

Conceptions of the supernatural and religious ideas in general owe their origin first of all to the helplessness and ignorance of men in face of the forces of nature. Forces, which men cannot understand, are personified – they are represented as manifestations of the activity of spirits. From the most primitive times men personified natural forces in this way. With the birth of the class society when men were impelled to act by the social relations which dominated them and which they did not understand, they further invented supernatural agencies doubling, as it were, the state of society. The gods were invented superior to mankind just as kings and lords were superior to the common people. All religion, and all spiritualism, has at its heart this kind of doubling of the world. It is spiritualistic and invents a dominating ideal or supernatural world over against the real mankind. Very characteristic of spiritualism are such antitheses as soul – body, god – man, heavenly kingdom – earthly kingdom; the forms and idea of things grasped by the intellect and the world of material reality, perceptible by the senses. For spiritualism there is always a higher, more real, more material world - which is prior to the existing material world, is its ultimate source and cause and to which the material world is subject. For materialism, on the other hand, there is one world, the material world.

For nearly 300 years there has been put forward a variety of philosophy known as “subjective spiritualism”. This teaches that the material world does not exist at all. Nothing exists but the sensations and ideas in our minds, and there is no external material reality corresponding to them. And then again this subjective spiritualism is put forward in the form of a doctrine concerning

knowledge: it denies that we can know anything about objective reality outside ourselves, and says that we can have knowledge of appearances only and not of “things in themselves”. This sort of spiritualism has become very fashionable today. It even parades as extremely “scientific”. They say that the real world is unknowable, the area of mysterious forces which pass our comprehension. It is not difficult to see that the fashion for such doctrines is just a symptom of the decay of society.

Materialism and Spiritualism in Practise

Spiritualists tell us not to place “too much” reliance on science. They tell us that most important truths are beyond the reach of science. Hence they encourage us not to believe things on the basis of evidence, experience, and practise but to take them on trust from those who pretend to know better and to have some higher source of information. Spiritualism tells us that what is most important is the inner life of soul. They tell us that we shall never solve our human problems except by some inner regeneration. Spiritualism has very deep roots in our ways of thinking, and so men often clothe their thoughts and aspirations in spiritualist dress. But the spiritualist form is always an impediment, a hindrance in the expression of truth- a source of confusion and error.

On every issue we should be followers of materialism against spiritualism. This is because we know that it is in the light of materialist theory, which studies things as they are, without spiritualist fantasies about them, that we can understand the forces of nature and society so as to be able to transform society and to master the forces of nature. And because of this too, materialism teaches us to have confidence in ourselves- in people. It teaches us that there are no mysteries beyond our understanding, that we need not accept that which is as being the will of god, that we should contemptuously reject the “authoritative” teachings of those who set up to be our masters, and that we can ourselves understand nature and society so as to be able to change them. We should hate spiritualism, because under cover of high- sounding words it preaches subjection of man to man, belittles the power of humanity, which was expressed by Maxim Gorky when he wrote:

“For me, there are no ideas beyond man; for me, man and only man is the miracle worker and future master of all forces of nature. The most beautiful things in this world are the things made by labour, made by skilled human hands, and all our ideas are born out of the process of labour. And if it is thought necessary to speak of sacred things, then the one sacred thing is the dissatisfaction of man with himself and his striving to be better than he is; sacred is his hatred of all the trivial rubbish which he himself has created; sacred is his desire to do away with greed, envy, crime, disease, war all enmity between men on earth; and sacred is his labour”

Ranjit Mulay

PEOPLE’S MOVEMENT ON ERADICATION OF SUPERSTITION

Superstition has been one of the most dangerous evils of Indian society. With little or no education, overpowering customs and excessive-belief mentality have resulted in deep-rooted superstitions in our society. With more than 120 centers throughout Maharashtra, Karnataka and Goa, the Andhashradhha Nirmoolan Samiti (ANS) has mobilized a number of activities to eradicate superstitions and create rational thinking. It does not receive foreign or Government funding: and, therefore, it is a people’s movement working solely on support of the people and for the people. In its campaign to fight against superstitions, since last decade, ANS has exposed hundreds of so-called bogus Babas or Godmen who have been cheating innocent, gullible people by performing miracles and/or promising tall claims in the name of God. It has solved the mystery of Bhanamati, supposed to be a phenomenon, in which an invisible entity cuts and rips off clothes, sets fire, throws stones on the roofs etc. The people believe that even small pieces of stone and glass come out of the Bhanamati stricken persons and ash appear in food plates. This phenomenon is very rampant in the backward regions like Konkan and Marathwada. The phenomenon is culture based psychological problem of the women of these areas. In a campaign movement undertaken by

ANS with eight working groups, has created awareness amongst the people of 250 villages in these regions. ANS has also treated more than 1100 victims in this area.

As Dr Narendra Dabholkar, founder chairman of ANS, points out “ANS functions with basic five-point programmes. Firstly, it opposes harmful superstitions that exploit people. Secondly, it cultivates scientific attitude and skepticism. Thirdly, it encourages constructive critical analyses of the religious traditions and taboos imposed by the religion. Fourthly, it carries forward the legacy of saints and reformers of Maharashtra. And finally, ANS links itself with other progressive movements in the society”. With these objectives in their minds the volunteers of ANS attempt to develop an attitude of critical thinking in the people.

Since there are a lot of superstitions about snakes, ANS holds snake rallies periodically to educate people and remove the misconceptions. A couple of years ago, ANS took approximately 90 snakes of 22 species around Goa, Belgaum, Ratnagiri and Sindhudurg districts. Six snake experts, who accompanied the mobile fair, elaborated on various aspects, facts and figures about the reptiles.

ANS also attempts to protect the environment in various ways. For instance, during the Holi festival, in Maharashtra, the worshippers cut the tree branches and collect cow dung cakes to burn in the bonfire. The worshippers also prepare '*Puran Poli*', thousands of which are burnt in the Holi fire as offerings to God. The Samiti appeals to these people to sweep the surroundings and burn the garbage instead of tree branches and eatables. The Intension is to prevent the felling of trees and educate the public about protecting the environment and prevent pollution. The Samitee also requests the worshipers to donate their *Puran Polis* for distributing among the poor instead of burning them in the fire. ANS arranges the collection of *Puran Polis* and distributes them amongst thousands of poor and hungry people living in the slum areas. The Samiti, in its new campaign, encourages people to burn tobacco products like *Gutkha* pouches, cigarette packets in the Holi fire or to burn the effigies of tobacco products to symbolize the burning the demon of addiction.

Secondly, during the Ganesh festival, the oil painted Plaster of Paris idols of Lord Ganesh, along with garlands, flowers and leaves are immersed in lakes or rivers, which are generally the main sources of drinking water of nearby villages. The water and soil get polluted due to the toxic chemicals in the paints, which are harmful to all life forms. The lead and mercury in the paint are neuro-toxin and may harm the brain. The ANS volunteers request Ganesh devotees to donate the Ganesh idols for immersing them in the water of abandoned stone quarries. In this way they are able to collect more than 25000 idols every year through out Maharashtra. Similarly people are requested to hand over the garlands and leaves so that they can be given to farmers and nursery owners for producing organic manure.

As a step further, ANS activists organize health rallies too. They carry brooms on their bicycles, travel from village to village, and sweep localities and villages, to emphasize the rationale of cleanliness and healthy environment for prevention of diseases and promotion of health for the community. This is also in tune with the teachings of the great educationist, social reformer and saint, Sant Gadge Baba.

ANS believes in the dictum of “healthy mind in a healthy body” and tries to explain the rationale behind the dictum with the help of doctors and psychiatrists and thereby it tries to educate students and adults to desist from alcohol, chewing tobacco, taking other harmful drugs or doing any irrational act, which may harm their health and result in harming the brain. Besides, it also conducts a special course for adolescent girls regarding their health.

During pilgrimages and annual fairs of a number of known and unknown deities, thousands of animals are sacrificed in the name of God/Goddess at some 400 places in Maharashtra. So far ANS, through peaceful agitations and educating the public, has managed to prevent this inhuman practice of animal sacrifice in more than 150 pilgrimages in Maharashtra.

Campaign against miracles has been perhaps the most laudable activity of ANS. It challenges anyone claiming to perform the miracle using supernatural power. It has also collected a sum of five lakh rupees through public contribution and this amount is kept aside in fixed deposit to be paid to anyone who wins the challenge. All those who have accepted the challenge till now have either failed or withdrawn at the last moment. On the other hand, ANS has also demonstrated that the so-

called miracles can be attempted by any layperson with a little practice. To prove the same, the activists have demonstrated certain miracles; piercing nail through tongue, sleeping on the bed of sharp nails, walking on the fire, etc. This has helped to demystify and eradicate wrong concepts about miracles and create public awareness regarding the truth behind the 'miracle'. The volunteers, throughout the year, conduct approximately 2000 demonstrations all over Maharashtra. People are no more an easy prey to the miracle claimers.

ANS believes in simple marriage ceremonies and encourages performing marriages according to Mahatma Jotiba Phule's "*Satyashodhak*" way of wedding in which unnecessary ceremonies, wasteful expenses on pomp and show, lavish feasts, gifts, etc., are done away with. The Samiti has conducted more than 150 weddings in this manner; many of them being of the volunteers themselves.

Volunteers of ANS take pride in practicing and preaching universal brotherhood. They are against any kind of discrimination, on the basis of race, religion, caste or gender. They believe that to justify the division of human beings on the basis of religion or caste in the name of god is a primitive concept and the most disgraceful blind faith. It is with this background that the ANS held a large rally on this issue at Shani Shingnapur of Ahmadnagar district. In fact ANS has been educating the public and mobilizing its support against this blatant discrimination against women. A special campaign to highlight superstition among women in Maharashtra, a conference on "Women and Superstition", was organized in Sholapur. Activists working in various other women organizations of Maharashtra also attended the conference.

Along with eradication of superstition, ANS has also undertaken project to inculcate scientific temper in the society. This is claimed to be the only project of its kind in the country. Through this project, teachers are trained in subjects of superstition eradication and scientific attitude. These teachers in turn teach the students in schools and colleges. Nearly 17,000 teachers have been trained who have further taught some 350,000 students. These students appear for special examinations conducted through this program and successful candidates are awarded certificates signed by eminent scientists like Dr. Vasant Gowarikar. This project is partly funded by the Central Government's Department of Science and Technology and partly by Yashavantrao Chavan Pratishthan.

ANS, besides direct campaigning and awareness programs, utilizes other media to achieve its objectives. For instance, it has published more than 30 books in Marathi on various aspects of superstition. A number of books and booklets have been published arguing against pseudo science like astrology and Vaastu Shastra. A monthly magazine, "Andhashradhha Nirmoolan Vartapatra", is being published for last 10 years. With circulation of nearly 20 000 copies, it remains the highest circulating magazine amongst such magazines. For the non-Marathi readers, ANS brings out "Thought & Action", an English Quarterly on a regular basis. It also uses audio visual aids to show films and slides on related topics while volunteers perform street shows and skits, sing songs, and hold poster exhibitions.

Considering the unparalleled function of ANS, the Maharashtra Foundation in the US felicitated the organization with its first *Samajkarya Gourav Puraskar* in 1996. Dr Dabholkar, however, feels that the Government has not been keen on recognizing the function of ANS even for educational purpose.

Chandrashekhar Joshi

VISHWANATH SWAMI GETS THE AGARKAR AWARD

On the Gopal Ganesh Agarkar's birth anniversary, 17th June, Mr. Vishwanth Swami, who is confronting Kalki Maharaj, was honored with the Agarkar award. The ceremony was held in Sane Guruji auditorium in Pune. Deepak Girme gave the opening welcome speech. He introduced Vishwanath Swami and spoke gloriously about his work to the audience. Mr. Girme read aloud the contents of the felicitation certificate. The next speaker to address the gathering was ex-chief

justice of the Bombay High Court, Mr. B.G. Kolse-Patil. He presented the award to Vishwanath Swami. The chief guest for the occasion was the president of Rashtra Seva Dal, Subhash Ware, who was the main speaker for the evening. He stressed on the fact that although ANS is doing a commendable job, our society is still chasing baba, buvas, maharajas and he regretted and lamented that their sphere of influence is increasing. He urged the audience to realize that these elements of the society do good social service but at the same time use science on everyone. Psychological pressures, globalization and speed with which everything is advancing makes people incapable of coping with their problems – this is turning them to baba, buvas, maharajas for quick solutions. Subhash Ware pointed out that the baba, buvas, maharajs will not be working single handedly; they have help and assistance from people around. This has to be taken a note of, he emphasized.

In response to the honor and award, Vishwanath Swami recalled how he strived to get out of an atmosphere where blind superstitions like 'Kalki' cult prevailed in the area where he is working.. He was working as a mere clerk. He then gathered forces with like-minded people and started a school in the area. The school was in dire financial situations and went bankrupt. He then decided to pursue abolish the 'Kalki' in the area. Kalki is none but one unknown person, Vijay Kumar, who suddenly became famous. Vijay Kumar had announced that he was the tenth incarnation of Vishnu 'Kalki'. He claimed that for the sake of his devotees, his followers, poor people, old and disabled people, he has collected crores of rupees. That person claimed that a Kalki Bhagwan Trust has been made which has more than 100 crores of rupees from which he intends to help all.

Vishwanath Swami said that he will not rest until the hoax of 'Kalki' is exposed; the award, he felt, had given him an added strength to go on fighting the ills of Andhashradhha in his region.

As the president of the committee that gave away the award, Mr. B.G. Kolse-Patil was a bit puzzled and sorry as to how society can keep quiet when such exploitation abounds. He mentioned that the idea of being a rational, scientific minded human being has been enshrined in our constitution; it is our duty as citizens to see that it is practiced. Although it is claimed that Gautam Budhha is an incarnation of Vishnu, so is it a tradition to have the next tenth incarnation of Vishnu also from our country? The speaker expressed his desire to route this nonsense from the roots itself. To seek help from sadhu baba's and buvas is a sign of weak mental state. To eradicate this viewpoint, it is essential to start rational thought from our homes, in our daily lives. Humans create all practices and processes and they are changeable; and to start with let the humans change their mentalities also. The speaker emphasized this fact. One of the devotees of 'Kalki' Maharaj tried to disrupt Mr. Kolse-Patil's speech. But he did not succeed.

The programme was organized and arranged by ANS's Pune, Pimpri and Chinchwad chapters.

MERCHANTS OF NIRVANA

For years, Mudit Verma suffered from anxiety attacks. Doctors put him on tranquilizers, which only gave him temporary relief. He was soon the patient of a prominent psychoanalyst and spent hours describing his dreams and fears. But even that did not ease his tensions. Finally, when Mudit was about to give up, a friend gave him a CD about *Vipassana* meditation. Mudit took to *Vipassana* meditation and through its doorway entered the arena of New Age spirituality. But today, five years down the line, he's once again a worried, restless man. "I've tasted all flavours of spirituality, paid obeisance to all exalted feet and am back to square one," he says. Welcome to the world of spiritual *Nirvana*, but to get there you need to spend, and spend big. The motto of the New Age gurus appears to be: "To keep stress out, bring money." But not all have got the deliverance as advertised. Actually it was quite the opposite. After being ensnared into high-priced spiritual sessions through aggressive marketing campaigns of New Age spiritual gurus, many have found disillusionment.

Make No Mistake. New Age spirituality is not otherworldly. In their bid to expand their human base, the hi-tech gurus market their wares with a bull's eye view. Be it hiring PR agencies, producing sleek CDs or even expensive newsletters, the gurus beat corporate honchos on their own turf.

Gurus have updated themselves to a liberalized age. Making money, for instance, is not seen as a materialist pursuit. The guru has handy and 'enlightening' advice for those who purchase stocks. For those, who battle in boardrooms, there are laughter and de-stress sessions in exotic locales. In short, modern India's spiritual guides are also marketing wizards who know how to enhance the commercial appeal of their product. The disciple is a consumer and even if the product is religion, it has to be shaped to suit his tastes.

Some have become Hindu versions of televangelists and others sign official deals with multinational companies to "help new recruits handle the tensions of working life." It is evident that spirituality is no longer what it was. The only people who seem to find New Age pursuits worthwhile are the gurus themselves, and their slick marketing personnel. But the peddlers of instant nirvana have a rough and ready answer about the pursuit of Mammon.

"What's wrong with commercialization?" asks Sri Sri Ravishankar, one of the best-known New Age gurus. "Commerce is not bad. The world thrives on it." Sri Sri Ravishankar created a spiritual revolution of sorts in urban landscapes and mindscapes through his Art of Living course. He emerged in the spiritual firmament in 1982 after having discovered the Sudarshan Kriya following a 10-day silence. He headquartered in Bangalore and his courses became an instant hit throughout the country. "Once you get into Art of Living, the idea of commercialization will go away," says he. "We have adopted 15,000 villages in India in one year. All our teachers are doing charity work, not commercial work."

Sri Sri Ravishankar says his enterprise appears commercial only because of the fee that is charged. "We do so because we believe that the modern mind has become grossly commercial and can be tapped only in a commercial way," he adds. His ashram runs a corporate executive programme aimed at helping senior managers in India's leading companies to cope with high stress. They charge Rs 3 lakh annually to give instructions to 25 executives. As in the case of other corporates, the AoL (i.e. Art of Living but not to be confused with America On Line) also uses famous faces to propagate its techniques.

"It's the same as Shah Rukh Khan advertising for Hyundai or Amitabh Bachchan selling Chyavanprash," says an AoL trainer. Most of those who have taken to AoL are young. The jean-clad, goggled young things with long hair and sparkling eyes hold pop *bhajan* singing sessions, karaoke stunts and modern versions of what an earlier generation calls *satsangs*, in hip joints such as multiplexes, music stores and shopping malls. "It's almost like a rock concert," says Rakhi, who has recently joined the AoL movement. "This Hare Rama, Hare Krishna is so cool and happening. Maybe it's spiritual too." AoL's fast-paced success has inspired many other movements. In recent times, Swami Jaggi Vasudev's Isha Yoga and Swami Sukhbodananda's stress-relief courses have spread far and wide with the help of well-choreographed PR exercises. Jaggi Vasudev's PR machine takes care to project their guru with the same aggressiveness of a luxury car. Interestingly, the new marketing techniques have also affected age-old groupings such as the Brahmakumaris. They too have a commercial and brand wing propagating their presence, and are happy serenading connections with political bosses. "I believe that our ideals are the best for humanity," says B. Kalpana, a member of the sect. "And if one has to market them to make them popular, it is for the good of humanity."

Then there is Bangalore-based Daivajna Somayaji who promises more than stress relief to corporate honchos. He specializes in smoothing product starts and increasing investment bankers' profit margins, and claims to have a '99.9 per cent' success rate. He visits offices and studies energy patterns of the location and proffers advice. Of course, he has a PR firm.

Strange are the images of this New Age spirituality. Saffron-robed monks sitting in front of computers; actress Ruby Bhatia earnestly visiting Iskcon temples for spiritual succor; model turned AoL instructor Rhea Pillai waxing eloquent on the need for spirituality in modern life. Click onlinedarshan.com and you will find yourself in the portals of famous temples, be it Tirupati or Vaishno Devi. You can have darshan without stirring from your homes. Skeptical and critical voices are now being heard. A recent book, *The Karma of Brown Folk*, authored by Vijay Prashad, criticizes New Age gurus of the United States and their gimmicks.

Prashad says these gurus have packaged Indian wisdom in saleable boxes to lure American public. Deepak Chopra, Rajneesh, and Maharishi Mahesh Yogi misused Indian wisdom, which in essence is a comprehensive balance of materialism and spirituality, to suit the needs of the American market, he says.

In India too, skeptics are coming out to the open. In a recent public debate in Delhi, Javed Akhtar, poet and professed atheist, criticized Sri Sri Ravi Shankar and other modern gurus. "It is not enough to teach rich people how to breathe," he said. Nobody knows how long this fad will continue. If we go by ancient lore, enlightenment waits only at the end of a long and arduous path. It is obviously not available in spiritual supermarkets at the flash of a credit card.

God is a Catchphrase

Atheism is no longer chic. According to an ORG-MARG poll, 94 per cent of young adults in the country believe in God, 62 per cent pray regularly and 35 per cent perform puja and visit a shrine once a week. Gone are the 60s when Sartre and Camus held sway. This is the age of New Age spirituality. The Art of Living course of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar attracts a crowd of over 50,000 even in small towns, demonstrating the pull of the New Age nirvana merchants.

Mata Nirmala Devi routinely draws a crowd of one lakh for her mass Kundalini awakenings, as does Mata Amritanandamayi in the metros. Yoga is a household term, worldwide. Hollywood actresses such as Gwyneth Paltrow, Kate Winslet, Cate Blanchett, Madonna, Meg Ryan and Uma Thurman swear by it.

The Defense Institute of Physiological and Allied Sciences (DIPAS) prescribes yoga to help acclimatize soldiers to adverse operational terrain. Cricket stars such as Javagal Srinath, Venkatesh Prasad and Anil Kumble practice it while Sachin Tendulkar is reported to have consulted renowned yogacharya B.K.S. Iyengar. Wisdom traditions from other places are also finding takers in India. Books of the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh are immensely popular. Pranic Healing founder Choa Kok Sui and Karuna reiki founder William Rand enjoy tremendous popularity too.

Hospitals nowadays incorporate meditation and yoga to prevent heart disease, along the lines of American doctor Dean Ornish's famous programme. The Indraprastha Apollo Hospital has opened a body-mind medicine department, in collaboration with New Age guru Deepak Chopra. However, New Age in India is still largely an urban westernized phenomenon. Curiously enough, the urban elite have discovered Indian spirituality through the distilled versions available from the west. Former model Nandini Sen is the flamboyant flag bearer of art of living (AoL), while model Sheetal Malhar is an avid follower of Mata Nirmala Devi.

Companies that have institutionalized meditation include Godrej, Lupin Labs, Ayodhya Paper Mills and the Nagarjuna and Alacrity group. In Mumbai, employees of Benzer get a 10-day break to learn Vipassana. Conversely, spiritual organizations, too, have opened management centers. The advertisement world, too, is responding to the new trends by using images of meditation more and more.

Televangelists

The idiot box is no longer about song and dance. It is also the peddler of enlightenment. Emancipation lies at the touch of the remote-control button. What started out as a 'religion slot' in Doordarshan's daybreak routine is now espoused by full-fledged channels dedicated wholly to religion.

There are umpteen religious channels, including Maharishi Veda Vision, Sanskar, Aastha and, Sadhana, all with an overtly Hindu bent. For Christians, there's God TV, Jeevan TV, MiracleNet, Eternal World Television, Global Catholic Network and Golden Age Television. Muslims have appropriated Pakistan TV and several Arabic channels and Sikhs switch on Alpha Punjabi, and Lashkara.

And more players are sauntering in. ATN International's bilingual Ahimsaa TV debuted on Gandhi Jayanti this year, and Sanskriti and Sudarshan TV are in the works. At least 50 per cent of the 40-plus age group, accounting for over 60 per cent of the estimated 150

MONEY MACHINES

While every spiritual organization stresses on its not-for-profit agenda, their liberal donations and contributions barely dent their finances.

Sri Sri Ravi Shankar

The AoL guru takes part in 250 satsangs the world over. Each of these generates not less than Rs 15 to 20 lakhs. He speaks in 40 countries annually and has travelled to 175 cities. AoL is a great marketing model. It has different pricing models from city to city and more expensive advanced courses in big cities. Besides, Sri Sri also delves into the area of corporate training with his Apex (achieving personal excellence) course. The management programme has been personally designed by the guru, in spite of having no real background in the field. The Art of Living encompasses everything from yoga and breathing exercise to management development programmes and finding happiness within oneself. AoL offers tapes and CDs priced at anything between \$20 each and \$280 for a set of 28 tapes, and photographs with calligraphy, along with some rather mystifying products like portable back-rests (in forest green, navy and purple) at \$29.

Mata Amritanandamayi

Started as Sudhamani, devoted to Lord, was ostracized from parents' house and berated for generosity with which she shared her family's meagre possessions. First followers drawn from fishing community; began to gain critical mass in 1978. Her energy level is miraculous. Sleeps only two hours a day, eats once a day. Considered one of the best time-managers in the world. Mata has visited all continents, regular destinations include the US, UK, Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Ireland, Switzerland, Holland, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, Mauritius... Mata's stores stock everything from DVDs and VHS tapes, priced between \$15 and \$27, to books, incense sticks and even unlikely items like 'essential oil' at \$10, and Amma shower gel and body lotion at \$9 each.

Sri Satya Sai Baba

Source of income not known, assumed to be largely from devotees' donations but the manner in which Satya Sai Baba's ashram at Whitefield is run, it's evident he has thousands of crores of rupees.

Maharshi Yogi

The bearded popularizer of transcendental meditation has earthly holdings that will blow your mind. His corporate empire includes land holdings, hotels, publishing houses, a TV channel and plans for spiritual theme parks.

Payal Bhuskute
Courtesy: *Sunday Chronicle*

ATROCITIES BY DEVARSHI LADY

ANS has conducted teachers training camps all over Maharashtra every year, for last 10 - 12 years to inculcate scientific temperament and various aspects of superstition eradication. These trained teachers in turn teach the students the importance of eradication of this social evil. Thousands of

students have taken part in this extra curricular activity under the guidance of the ANS trained teachers. But some one may raise doubts about its utility since the superstitions are still rampant and there are no indications that this evil will vanish from the face of the earth. However a small step towards eradication of superstition was witnessed recently in a small village in Karaveer Taluka of Kolhapur district. Shinganapur is a comparatively very prosperous village which has a strong hold on power structures to control sugar factory, Banking facilities, Zilla Parishad etc. It was quite unexpected that witch-hunting incident took place in such a politically conscious village. A newly wed bride age 21 years, was suffering from some severe fever during which she lost her speech. She was simply not able to utter a single word. The family members and village elders came to the conclusion that a spirit had haunted the bride and she should undergo the treatment by a local Devarshi lady. The Devarshi lady came and saw the 'Ghost'. After performing usual rituals, Devarshi realized that she is not able to regain the speech. The 'expert' lady then insisted that worn out used chappal should be put in her mouth to throw the ghost out, which is preventing the bride from speaking. When the bride refused to hold the chappal in her mouth, Devarshi lady started beating her with a baton. The helpless bride at last held the chappal in her mouth presuming that her suffering will be over. But Devarshi lady started asking the 'spirit' to show the place where from it has come. Bride was helpless. Devarshi lady stated beating her since the spirit was not obeying her command. The bride started running from place to place to escape the whipping. Holding the chappal in her mouth, she came out on the street, followed by Devarshi lady with the baton in her hand. A large crowd followed them which turned it into some sort of procession. Whenever the chappal slipped from the bride's mouth she got beaten up by Devarshi lady. The onlookers were enjoying the scene but never dared to stop the atrocity. At last the bride fell unconscious on the street. Devarshi lady was happy to find the place of spirit where from it had emerged. Since the Goddess spoke through Devarshi lady, all were happy.

While this was going on the news reached a nearby school. The teachers and students could not believe that these things can happen in their own village. Though the students were too afraid of what was going on, they gathered their strength and protested along with their teachers. The teachers - Prabhavati Jadhav, Vandana Bachate, Ashwini Surange, Naseem Mulla Aparadh, Kusum Kamble, Sunanda Patil, Sopanrao Vadgaokar - and students took initiative to stop this atrocity. They argued with the family members and local leaders urging them to stop the heinous act against the innocent bride. Though some leaders were not happy with this interference by teachers, the crowd did disperse with shame. It is yet to be seen what repercussions will be there on the teachers and students and what stand the family members and local dignitaries will take. These kinds of acts are not new to villagers. Most of the places, these are daily routines and no one finds it as strange. These things happen in one form or other and the so-called educated class just ignores it. They will never open their mouth even as a token of protest. What made the teachers and students of Shinganapur to boldly stand against the local leaders? The strength to protest might have come because of the training given to them by ANS. Teachers and students in fact, acknowledged the contributions made by ANS. Teachers took a lot of risk in opposing the village elders since they are not supposed to hurt the religious sensitivities of the community, nor are they supposed to take part in the local politics as they are paid Government employees. However teachers were desperate enough to protest, as they could not remain passive or just be passive onlookers when such a dreadful thing was happening around them. There was even a risk of losing their jobs too. However Sanjay Sulagave, ANS activist, took initiative to lessen the hard feelings of the community elders towards teachers.

Education is thus a powerful tool to eradicate the evil traditions effectively, which affect our village poor.

Anil Chavan

CONFRONTATION OF SCIENCE AGAINST SUPERSTITION

The NDA ruled the country for six years under the leadership of the BJP. A number of exciting and astounding stories about the events and deeds that took place during this rule are being uncovered

every day. Arun Shourie's much lauded disposing of the public sector undertakings (PSUs) at throw away prices, the unprecedented 'Tahelka' regarding the purchase of defense equipment, striking off Adwani's name from the list of accused in the Ayodhya demolition case during his tenure as Home Minister were just a few of those stories. More important is Dr. Murali Manohar Joshi's move to bring about regressive changes in research and curriculum of history and to rewrite Indian history. His insistence on proving that the Vedic Aryas were the builders of the Harappan civilization and Sanskrit was their mother tongue and inclusion of Astrology and Paurohitya (priest craft) as subjects of study in the higher education are famous examples of his orthodoxy. Orthodox religions of all hues and shades vehemently oppose science. They encourage and promote rumors, such as, the drinking of milk by the Ganapati idols that started on a certain day or miracles performed by certain men and women when satisfied with adequate offerings. Encouraging superstition is not the monopoly of the BJP alone. The bill for eradication of superstition that was introduced in the legislative assembly of Maharashtra by Mr. Handore, a minister of the state government, had to be withdrawn. The defeat of this bill was brought about not only by the BJP and the Shivsena but also by the Congress and the Rashtravadi Congress who enthusiastically participated in the debate while Vilasrao Deshmukh, the Chief Minister was sitting pretty.

Dr. Narendra Dabholkar had time and again clarified with all earnestness that the bill is not pitted against any religion and opposes only those Buwas and Matajis who cheat the gullible, god fearing people with their miracle mongering. But the MLAs did not bother to listen to him. Ironically these representatives of the people sitting in the assembly consider miracle mongering a part of religiosity.

Terrible communal riots erupted at the time of the Partition of the country. Thousands of people had to flee from their home and hearth in search of safety. Communal feelings were at their very high. However the builders of our constitution, under the leadership of Dr. Ambedkar and Jawaharlal Nehru made Secularism and Social Justice the foundation of the nation's development. They emphasized use of science and technology in our industries and agriculture and cultivating scientific outlook against superstition along with it. The use of science and technology did increase but so did the grip of superstitions on the minds of not only the illiterate poor but also the well educated, well placed middle classes. A huge crop of miracle mongering Buwas and women pretending to be besotted by deities grew. Spiritual men marketing high spirituality, peace of mind and tranquility vied with them to drag more customers to themselves.

Since the Soviet Union fell apart and Socialism repudiated in its satellite states, Religious Fundamentalism and Casteism regained momentum and market economy has got a free hand. Science and technology have made remarkable advances in the last few decades. The religionists, the spiritualists and the godmen and godwomen make the best possible use of it to advertise and popularize themselves, taking care at the same time not to inculcate the scientific outlook in the populations at large. It has actually regressed.

This has occurred not in the developing countries of Asia and Africa alone. In the USA, the richest nation on the earth, which is also the most advanced in science and technology, a great debate challenging science is brewing at the present. The theory of evolution propounded by Darwin more than a century ago and accepted by all rational people is now being challenged by the religionists. After George Bush ascended the presidency for the second time, his Republican party acquired a majority on the school board in Kansas. This board immediately issued a directive to stop teaching the Darwin's theory of evolution in all schools of Kansas. If taught, the theory of divine creation too should be taught with equal emphasis on it. This totally contradicts the principle of secularism enshrined in the American Constitution. This whole debate is now being heard in the court of law.

Long time ago, in Delton, Tennessee, USA, a court fined teacher \$ 500 for teaching children Darwin's theory of evolution. Thus the debate on the theory of evolution vs. the divine creation is age-old. It started 120 years ago when Darwin published his theory. The same conflict has now reached its peak. When Science was in its infancy, it was generally accepted that the whole

universe, including all life is created by an unseen power that is God. The striding advances made by science continuously challenge this notion, diminishing God's stature and producing a conflict between the church and science thereby. The creation of life, especially that of the intelligent man has been the subject of hot debate ever since in underdeveloped India, as well as the most developed America.

How did life evolve on the earth? The various elements and simple compounds dissolved in the oceanic waters of the earth four billion years ago, along with the atmosphere and temperature prevailing at that time, induced chemical reaction that produced organic compounds that were necessary for producing life. From them were formed the first unicellular organisms. This was the origin of today's infinite varieties of living organisms- plants, animals, viruses and all. The theory of evolution tells us that all this happened according to natural laws. This has been confirmed by geology, fossils, and research in biochemistry ever since. Of course there are a few lacunae; some gaps to be filled, some questions to be answered and some dilemmas to be cleared; but this applies to all aspects of human knowledge, including religion and spirituality. The universe is infinite and the pursuit of knowledge is everlasting.

In the present debate brewing in the USA, the opponents maintain that the theory of evolution is now obsolete. The present life on earth is an intentional creation of an unknown but purposeful power. More than a dozen websites give a lot of information about this debate on creation of life. But one need not exert oneself much. All one needs to do is to read the article, "The theory of Evolution is Obsolete" by Dr. Arun Gadre, published in Lokasatta issue of the 5th of May. This article points out the questions that are not yet answered by the evolution theory and ridicules the supporters of it, branding them atheists. Being branded atheists hardly matters but the author thereby avails himself of the freedom to sing praises to the wonderful creations of the Lord and justify it.

Superstition and fatalist outlook are two most effective age-old weapons of the dominant ruling class for exploiting the toiling masses and preventing them from getting united. These high class people do need science and technology to enhance their profits and to enable them to live in luxury. But for the very same reason they take care not to engender scientific outlook among the masses of the society. The confrontation to any advance in science is solely in the service of these exploiters be it the Hindutwa of India or Christian Orthodoxy of USA. Maintaining superstition among the masses is to the advantage of this class. The confrontation by science against superstition thus becomes an inevitable part of social change.

Suman Oak

A CRITICAL LOOK AT NATUROPATHY

Naturopathy is a system of therapy and treatment, which relies exclusively on natural remedies, such as sunlight, air, water, supplemented with diet and therapies such as massage. However, some naturopaths have been known to prescribe such unnatural treatments as colon hydrotherapy for such diseases as asthma and arthritis. Naturopathy is based on the belief that the body is self-healing. The body will repair itself and recover from illness spontaneously if it is in a healthy environment. Naturopaths have many remedies and recommendations for creating a healthy environment so the body can spontaneously heal itself.

Naturopaths claim to be holistic, which means they believe that the natural body is joined to a supernatural soul and a non-physical mind and the three must be treated as a unit, whatever that means. Naturopathy is fond of such terms as "balance" and "harmony" and "energy." It is often rooted in mysticism and a metaphysical belief in vitalism.

Naturopaths are also prone to make grandiose claims about some herb or remedy that can enhance the immune system. Yet, only medical doctors are competent to do the tests necessary to determine if an individual's immune system is in any way depressed. Naturopaths assume that

many diseases, including cancer, are caused by faulty immune systems. The immune system, in simple terms, is the body's own set of mechanisms that attacks anything that isn't "self." Although, in some cases rather than attack "foreign bodies" such as viruses, fungi, or bacteria, the immune response goes haywire and the body attacks its own cells, e.g., in lupus, multiple sclerosis, and rheumatoid arthritis.

Naturopaths also promote the idea that the mind can be used to enhance the immune system and thereby improve one's health. However Dr. Saul Green argues that there are no reports in the scientific literature to support the contention that any AM (Alternative Medicine) operates through an established immunological mechanism. Regardless of the means used to evoke an anti-tumor response, all the evidence available from clinical and animal studies clearly shows that only after the attention of the NIS (Normal Immune System) has been attracted by some external manipulation of its components, is there any recognition by NIS of the existence of the tumor. All the evidence amassed over the past 30 years provides a clear answer to the question, "Does any AM treatment stimulate the NIS and cause it to identify and destroy new cancer cells when they appear?" The answer clearly is a NO!

Furthermore, the evidence that such diseases as cancer occur mainly in people with compromised immune systems is lacking. This is an assumption made by many naturopaths but the scientific evidence does not support it. Immunologists have shown that the most common cancers flourish in hosts with fully functional and competent immune systems. The notion that vitamins and colloidal minerals, herbs, coffee enemas, colonic irrigation, Laetrile, meditation, etc. can enhance the immune system and thereby help restore health is bogus. On the one hand, it is not necessarily the case that a diseased person even has a compromised immune system. On the other hand, there is no scientific evidence that any of these remedies either enhance the immune system or make it possible for the body to heal itself.

Naturopathy is often, if not always, practiced in combination with other forms of "alternative" health practices. Bastyr University, a leading school of naturopathy since 1978, offers instruction in such things as acupuncture and "spirituality." Much of the advice of naturopaths is sound: exercise, quit smoking, eat lots of fresh fruits and vegetables, practice good nutrition. Claims that these and practices such as colonic irrigation or coffee enemas "detoxify" the body or enhance the immune system or promote "homeostasis," "harmony," "balance," "vitality," and the like are exaggerated and not backed up by sound research.

From: <http://skepdic.com/natpathy.html>

PROTEST AGAINST GADGE MAHARAJ OF BEED

Not very far from Beed, there is a little village of Moregaon that has a Nagnath temple. It had been brought to the notice of ANS Beed chapter that Gadge Maharaj was exploiting devotees visiting the temple. From time to time ANS activists tried to intervene, but the Maharaj continued his practices. Ultimately to protest and seek timely intervention from authorities, a group of volunteers from the Beed ANS chapter started a one-day token fast, in front of the district collector's office. The protest was organized under the leadership of the president of the chapter, Col. Namdevrao Chavan and secretary, Prof. Savita Shete. The Beed ANS chapter has been very active in eradicating superstitions in the society. With political backing, the poor, hapless common persons are being looted in brought daylight by Gadge Maharaj. Because the Beed ANS chapter was vigilant, it could stem the rot very early on and wipe out the exploitation by Gadge Maharaj. The detail story is as follows: In Moregaon, one hoax person calling himself Gadge Maharaj claimed that he had divine powers to cure diseases, and rid persons of debilitating illnesses. He spread this news and advertisements in the village. The common, innocent people of the village believed him. ANS Beed chapter complained against this to the authorities. But unfortunately since the authorities took no concrete action, the volunteers had to stage a protest by calling a token fast.

Because of this display of strong action, the district collector took note and ordered the police to take the correct steps. The cheat, Gadge Maharaj, heard this news and absconded from the village. Police could nab three of his followers though.

Mrs. Tarabai Kakde, age of Khandala village narrates her experience. Since she was hard of hearing, she approached Gadge Maharaj for cure. Instead of offering any medication, apparently the Maharaj just uprooted her ear itself. Maharaj claimed that by doing so, he exorcized the ghost residing in her ears. But the poor lady had to seek proper medical help and had to have five stitches. Mr. Narayan Kale, who is physically challenged and has no sensations below his waist, said that Gadge Maharaj took money to use his divine powers to enable Mr. Kale walk. But nothing happened. Mr. Kale wasted thousands of rupees and remains physically challenged as yet. Mr. Kale lodged a complaint to Beed ANS chapter and because of timely action; more such exploitation by a cheat was stopped. The volunteers pledged that if Gadge Maharaj came back again, they would renew their protest with intensity. Participating District and police officers had a meeting and took note of the Gadge Maharaj issue. After this ANS volunteers called off the protest fast. The volunteers who participated in this protest were Col. Namdev Chavan, Prof. Savita Shete, R.K. Morale, Prof. Shinde, Prof. Bidwe, Vijay Gheware, Rajkumar Kadam, Tandale, Nagre, Sangita Lakhute, Shakuntala Jagtap, Ranjana Takle, Prof. Gawali, Mohan Chore, Santosh Bangar, Baban Pradhan, Fidel Chavan, D.G. Tandale and other office bearers.

Savita Shete

ASTROLOGERS ON WEATHER REPORT

The word '48 hours' has become nomenclature for impending disaster for whole of Maharashtra in the month of July and August. It's the maximum duration that Met Department can predict over when the rain will stop or continue. Satellites and computers apart, eminent astrologers in the city had their own take on predicting the future of this year's killer monsoon. Astrologer Anand Soni predicted in last week of July that the rains in the state would end in the next eight days (which did not stop even after fifteen days!) Dolly Manghat, astrologer of Maharashtra Herald believed that though the intensity of rain would reduce shortly, it will actually only stop in the last week of August. What is the cause of nature's fury? Manghat replies "The static position of planets (?) is to be blamed for the torrential rains. Negative vibrations of planets are bound to affect the earth. Anupam Kapil blames the changing of the name from Bombay to Mumbai as the primary cause for the problem. He adds "A recent development in which Mars formed a square with Saturn has worsened the situation. The torrential rain will end by mid-August but troubles in the state will continue and we may have to face more natural calamities. Numerologist Swetta Jamaani says "It is hard to predict beyond anything for 2005. The digits of the year add up to seven, which is a very moody number. There will be umpteen ups and downs throughout the year and none can be predicted."

Vandana Kalra
Courtesy: *the Herald*

UPROOT THE CAUSE OF SUPERSTITIONS

Dear Editor,

We remember to have written to you earlier also that I was the general secretary of the Karnataka Rationalist Association for over 10 years where we fought the fake Satya Sai Baba and exposed his frauds. Our "miracles investigation" did not touch even a hair of the Sai Baba. His business further flourished. Our Rationalist Association had mostly upper caste Hindus as members; but they could hardly influence their own womenfolk who continued to be superstitious. After working for 15 years, we got fed up. The point we are making is while we appreciate your campaign against

superstition and godmen etc. we want to impress you that much of the problem comes from the Hindu religion itself. Of all the different religions, Hinduism not only promotes superstition but also kills scientific spirit itself.

Every religion is bad but Hinduism is the worst. So fighting godmen and superstition but silence on Hinduism will be not only hypocritical but deceiving the people. This is our considered opinion. If you want to be true to yourself, you have to fight the disease (Hinduism) not its symptoms (superstition and godmen)

VT Rajashekhar
Editor, Dalit Voice

LEARN SOCIAL JUSTICE FROM UNITED STATES

How we Indians achieve such astonishing success abroad, especially in the US? How did the likes of Infosys and Wipro make it so big? The M-word, merit is only a half-answer. Behind this success is the much –hated and unacknowledged R-word. Reservations, that is, the American version of it. Strange as it may sound, the root of our success lies in the American Civil rights Movement of the fifties and sixties.

For centuries Black people had historically suffered from slavery and extreme exploitations, much like the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in India. So they fought long and hard to get rid of the injustices they faced a process that often cost them their lives. This struggle culminated in the landmark 1964 Civil rights Act. American President at that time, Lyndon B Johnson, recognized that inequalities couldn't be removed by simply passing laws. He said, "Freedom is not enough. You do not wipe away the scars of centuries by saying: now you are free to go where you want, and do as you desire, and choose the leaders you please. . You do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race and then say 'you are free to compete with all the others' and still justify that you have been completely fair."

The policy that emerged out of this understanding came to be known as "affirmative action" or deliberate and positive steps taken to include those from disadvantaged groups in education and employment. Over time, in addition to Black people, other groups such as ethnic minorities, women and disabled were included. Indians, being an ethnic minority themselves, naturally benefited. Remember that just a few decades ago, India was seen as a starving, poor, backward nation that barely spoke English. Indians overseas didn't have the luxury of a successful 'brand India' to ride on.

Luckily for us, without doing any of the fighting, we reaped the fruits of Civil Rights Movement. In the name of diversity, the Americans opened their elite universities and companies and corporate America began doing business with the likes of TCS, Wipro and Infosys. Yet our 'meritocratic' industry and 'self made' NRIs bleat about how India's competitiveness will be eroded if we give special considerations to SCs/STs in the private sector in India.

India Inc only seems interested in issuing bland statements supporting social justice as a way of keeping the government off its back. This is hypocritical. Contrast this with the US where as recently as 2003, the University of Michigan (Ann Arbor) fought for – and won – a Supreme Court ruling that said race can continue to be used as a factor for university admissions. Two white women had filed racism cases against the university since they felt they lost their seats to less qualified Black applicants. While the Supreme Court ruled that no extra points should be awarded for race, it approved the use of race in admissions. Far from condemning the verdict, over 60 big name employers had filed legal briefs supporting the university, arguing for affirmative action in not just admissions but hiring as well. These employers -- with over trillion dollars in combined revenue – included Intel, Microsoft, IBM, HP, Boeing, Lucent, Coca-Cola, PepsiCo, GE, Nike, General Motors, United Airlines and Proctor & Gamble.

Top universities such as Stanford, Harvard, MIT, and Yale had also filed supporting briefs. And coming from a place where merit means life or death, former military chiefs such as Generals Wesley Clark, Norman Schwarzkopf and Hugh Shelton also filed supporting legal briefs. In other words, the world's most successful companies, the world's most competitive businesses, the world's best universities and the world's most formidable armed personnel favor special consideration for disadvantaged group.

While we may argue that reservation is different from affirmative action. The Americans have been practicing it so whole-heartedly that they perhaps outdo our government. In thought, deed and success, India Inc is decades behind US Inc. If we want to be truly just, we must voluntarily implement genuine affirmative action. In the process, we will uncover a huge reservoir of talent in the same way the Americans uncovered that of the Indians in their midst. And we'll have a fairer and richer country in this process.

Chetan Dhruve
Courtesy: *Indian Express*

HEAVENLY MESS

Too Many planets for astrologers to swallow

Pity astrologers and their creaky old celestial mechanics because scientists keep discovering more and more members of our Solar System that simply refuse to fit into the mumbo-jumbo of horoscopes, sun signs and the zodiacs. Three of the trans-Saturnian planets – including gas giants Uranus and Neptune, and the distant Pluto – have been discovered only within the last 250 years, forcing many astrologers to somehow integrate them into their calculations over the years. But enough is enough. Following the recent confirmation of the discovery of the tenth planet designated 2003 UB313 which lies outside the orbit of Pluto – the largest object found in our Solar System since Neptune was discovered in 1846 – a clutch of Indian astrologers has thrown in the towel. They say the planet is beyond the scope of influencing our fate. Or as one astrologer put it: “Astrology tells us to concentrate on those planets which are capable of influencing a person and this new planet is far away to do so.”

Considering two of the planets which are supposed to be able to influence us, namely Rahu and Ketu, don't even exist in reality, who is kidding? Besides, what “influence” are we talking about here? Astrologers who claim to be “scientific” often trot out gravity and magnetism as the operating force. For the record, gravitational pull, say from Saturn, when calculated for its effect over an area the size of the human body, is equal to the gravitational pull from a car 1.7 meters away. So why are astrologers not interested in the position of automobiles near a baby at the time of birth? Imagine what would happen if one was born near a car park. As far as heavenly bodies affecting the Earth's magnetism at the birth is concerned, the Earth's magnetic field is quite weak and varies from 0.3 to 0.6 Gauss according to location. One could get considerably stronger exposure to magnetic fields from an ordinary refrigerator magnet. However, by giving up on 2003 UB313's alleged “influence”, it has been demonstrated once and for all that astrology is not only bunk; it can't keep up with the times either.

Courtesy: *Times of India*,